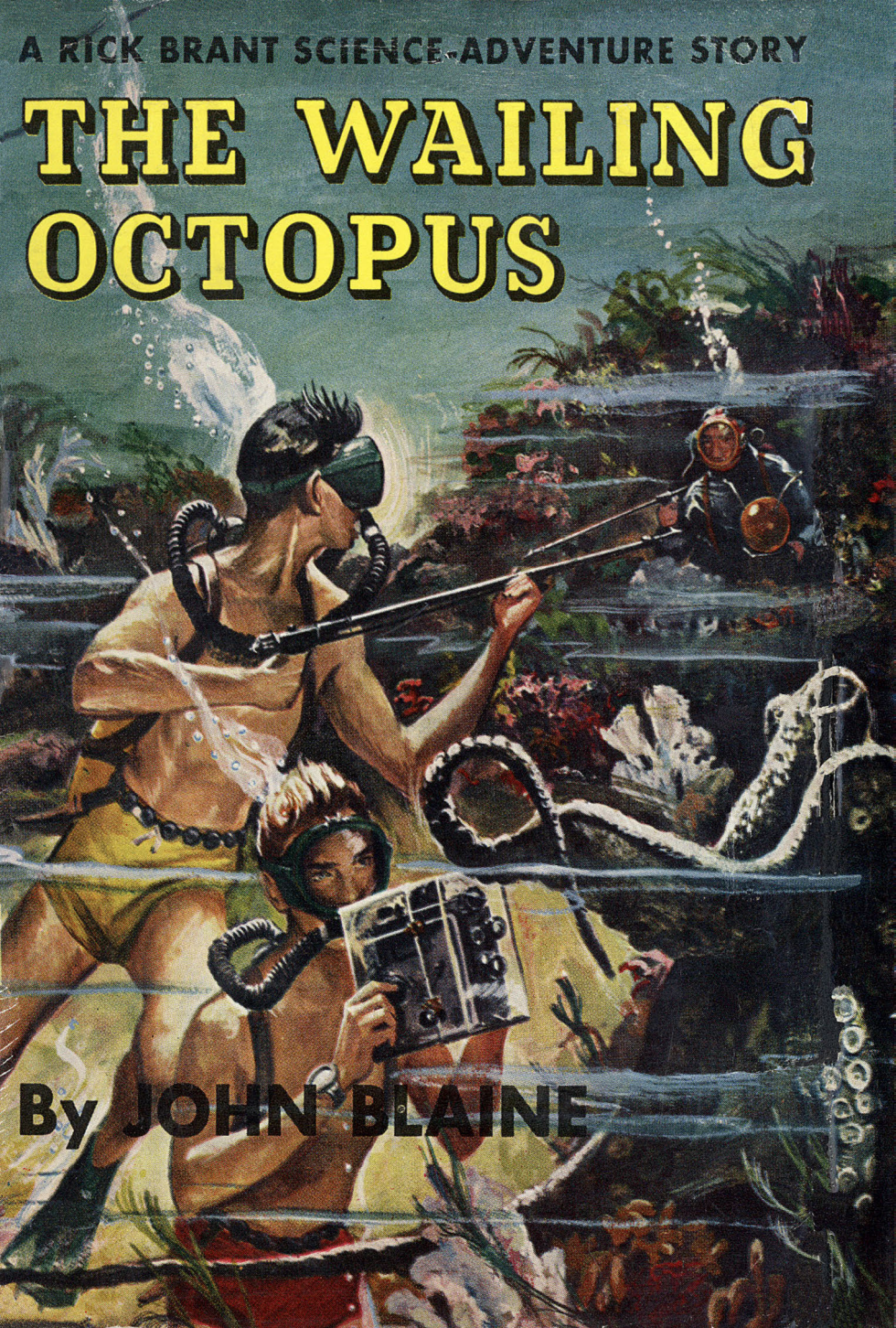
A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY

THE WAILING OCTOPUS



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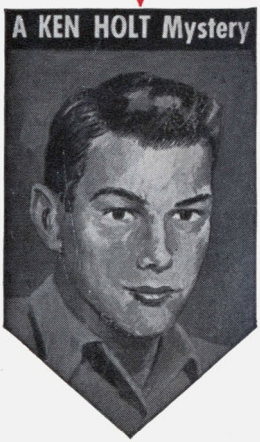

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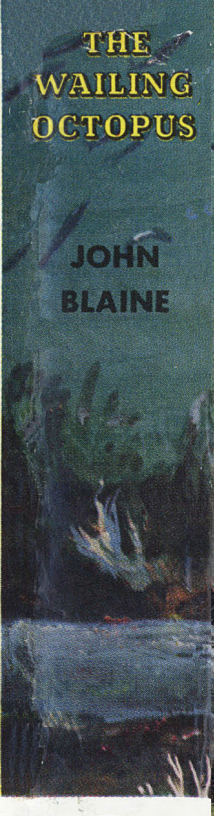
THE WAILING OCTOPUS

JOHN BLAINE



A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY

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A RICK BRANT ELECTRONIC ADVENTURE

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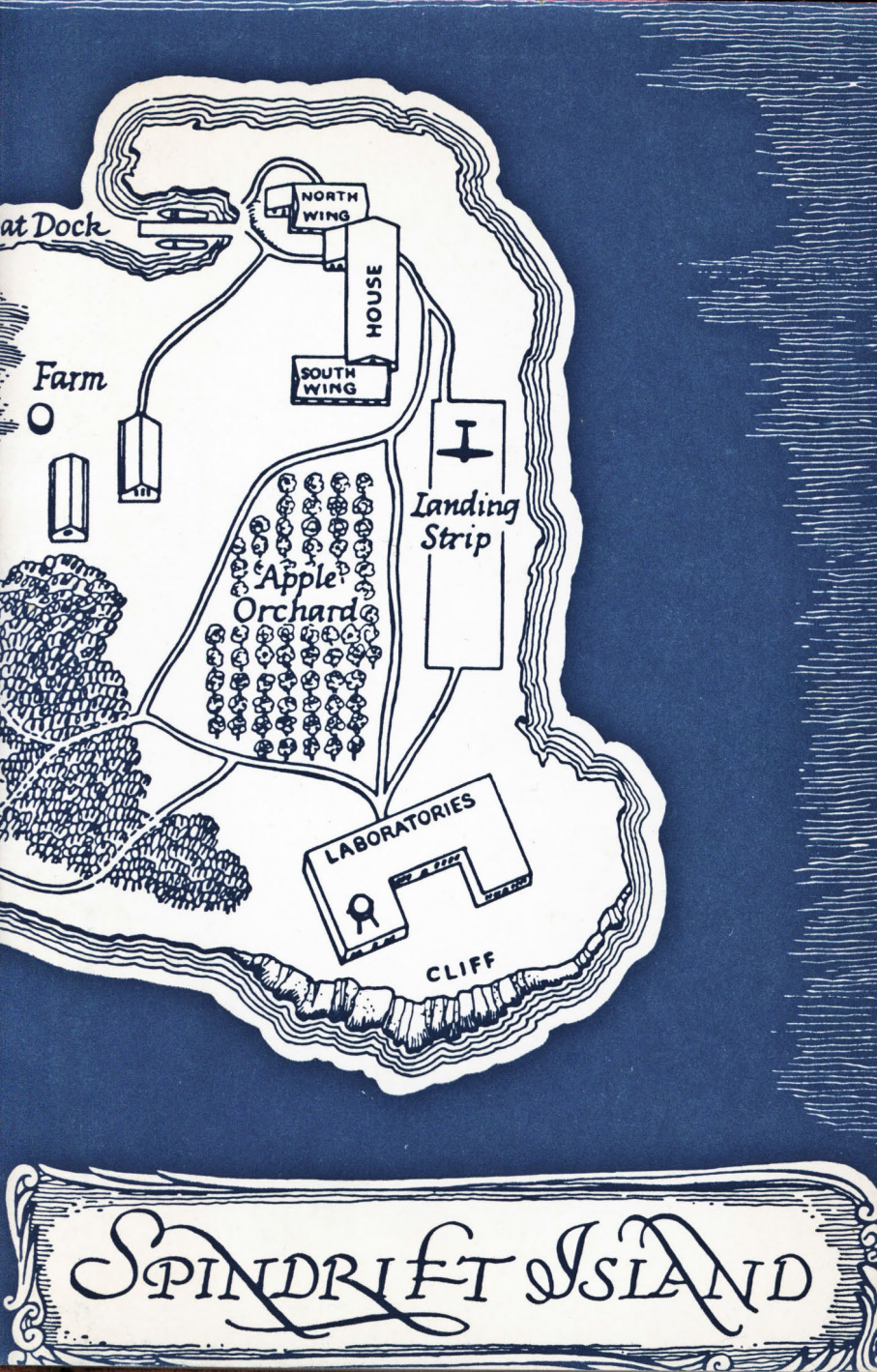
Cultivated Land
Wooded Land
Tidal Flats
CLIFF
CLEARING
Pirates
Rocket La
New Jersey Coast


at Dock
NORTH WING
HOUSE
SOUTH WING
Farm
Landing Strip
Apple Orchard
LABORATORIES
CLIFF
SPINDRIFT ISLAND

THE WAILING OCTOPUS

The RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE *Stories*

BY JOHN BLAINE

THE ROCKET'S SHADOW
THE LOST CITY
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THE WHISPERING BOX MYSTERY
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STAIRWAY TO DANGER
THE GOLDEN SKULL
THE WAILING OCTOPUS
THE ELECTRONIC MIND READER
THE SCARLET LAKE MYSTERY
THE PIRATES OF SHAN

With his spear Scotty jerked off the enemy frogman's face plate

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY

THE WAILING OCTOPUS

BY JOHN BLAINE

GROSSET & DUNLAP PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK, N. Y.

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THE WAILING OCTOPUS

THE WAILING OCTOPUS

CHAPTER I

Destination: Clipper Cay

THE Sky Wagon droned through Caribbean skies, following a compass course that led to Charlotte Amalie, capital city of the Virgin Islands. With eager interest, the four people in the small plane watched the blue water below. In a few moments they should pass over the island that was their ultimate destination.

Rick Brant, in the pilot's seat, turned to the husky, black-haired boy next to him. "See anything yet?" he asked.

Don Scott had been surveying the far horizon through binoculars. He took them from his eyes and shook his head. "Nothing but water. You sure there is an island called Clipper Cay?"

Rick let the plane fly itself for a moment while he stretched luxuriously. He was a lean, long-legged boy with brown hair and eyes and a bone-deep tan.

He grinned at his friend. "No faith. That's the trouble with you."

"No logic, that's the trouble with you," Scotty countered. "If there were such an island it would be called an island, not a cay. A cay is something that follows an O, as in okay."

The two scientists in the rear seat had been listening with amusement to the boys. Since the start of the expedition Scotty had professed doubt and misgiving, more for the sake of conversation than anything else, Rick was sure.

Dr. Anthony Briotti, archaeologist of the Spindrift staff, leaned forward. "At least pronounce it correctly, Scotty. 'Cay' is pronounced 'key.'"

"See?" Scotty exclaimed triumphantly. "The only place where they have islands called keys is in Florida. We're on a wild-goose chase, I tell you!"

Big Hobart Zircon, a nuclear physicist and longtime friend of the boys, tapped Scotty on the shoulder. "Since you're so certain of that, may I ask why you came?"

Scotty tried to look martyred. "Only because of the buddy system," he said solemnly. "The first rule of underwater safety—or above-water safety, for that matter—is that you have to swim with a buddy. You and Tony swim together, so I had to go along as a buddy for Rick. Somebody has to chase the mermaids away from him, and it might as well be me."

"That's nice of you," Rick said soberly. "There'll probably be a whole horde of mermaids guarding the

treasure, not to mention half a dozen sea monsters."

Tony Briotti said, "There's one mermaid I wish were with us, and that's Barby. After all, she started this whole thing. Too bad she has to miss out."

Rick's pretty sister, Barbara Brant, had unwittingly launched the flight to the Virgin Islands by getting into an argument with Tony Briotti about the authenticity of the legend that pirates had once used Spindrift Island as a hangout. Tony had challenged the legend. After that, of course, proof had to be found.

Rick had recalled digging up the remains of a campfire in Pirate's Field during the installation of equipment for the moon rocket, the first great experiment that had put the Spindrift Island scientific group in business as a research foundation headed by Rick's father, Hartson Brant. It was during this experiment that Scotty had joined the staff after rescuing Rick from an unscrupulous gang. The two boys had been on a number of expeditions together since that time and were fast friends. Zircon was one of the original Spindrift group. Youthful Tony Briotti was one of the new staff members, but he had already earned the loyalty and friendship of the boys by his fine leadership of the expedition to the Philippines, as related in *The Golden Skull.*

Starting with the campfire site, Barby and the boys had excavated Pirate's Field under Tony's direction. They had unearthed positive evidence that pirates had landed there. The most vital evidence was the

remains of a logbook, once the log of the bark *Maiden Hand,* sunk by the woman pirate Anne Bonney off the island of Clipper Cay in the Virgin Islands.

Scotty turned and looked at the two scientists. "I'm just kidding, of course. You couldn't have kept me from coming without tossing me into irons. But seriously, do you expect to find treasure, Tony?"

The archaeologist grinned. "Depends on what you mean by treasure. As I recall, one definition is 'something rare or precious.' Well, a chance to go skin diving in the Virgin Islands is certainly that—a rare and precious opportunity. At least I think so."

Hobart Zircon grunted, "And so do I."

"Amen," Rick echoed.

"You're evading the issue," Scotty accused. "You know perfectly well what I mean. Do you expect to find that golden statue mentioned in the logbook?"

"Expect? On a treasure hunt, one hopes; one doesn't expect," Zircon stated in his booming voice.

Rick smiled to himself. Probably no Spindrift expedition ever had started with such a flimsy excuse. According to the log of the *Maiden Hand,* the ship had gone down before the pirates could locate a golden statue of St. Francis, hidden by the bark's captain, Thomas Campion. According to Captain Campion, the statue had weighed "an hundredweight." Certainly a hundred pounds of gold was worth going after, but there were a few considerations that made finding it rather unlikely.

In Captain Campion's words: *"That we did prevent the boucaniers from fynding the blessede statue was moste fortunate, yette the bark did go to her deathe in twentye fathomes, and so the statue is loste."*

Rick and Scotty had become underwater enthusiasts on their return from the Philippines, and both had aqualung equipment that would take them to twenty fathoms without difficulty. However, working time at that depth was sharply limited by the capacity of their tanks. This was assuming that they were able to find the wreck of the *Maiden Hand* in the first place.

Still, there was enough of a chance to provide an excuse for a vacation expedition. The real purpose, so far as Rick was concerned, was to get in some superb swimming in clear water. He also intended getting plenty of underwater movies of the colorful reefs and fish. Scotty planned to do some underwater hunting.

Tony Briotti's interest grew out of his profession. The Virgin Islands had been pretty well worked over by archaeologists, and most of the early Indian middens and mounds explored. But on the west coast, archaeologists equipped with aqualungs had recently found primitive artifacts a half mile offshore, and Tony wanted to do a little underwater artifact hunting of his own.

Hobart Zircon was the only one without a specific objective. He had readily agreed to go along simply

because he wanted a vacation. He had said, "Tell you what, I'll go along and do some surface fishing. Rick and Scotty can catch fish underwater and put them on my hook, then signal me to pull up. If the fish aren't heavy enough to ruin my rest, I'll haul them in."

Mr. and Mrs. Brant had already made plans to take a vacation in Canada, and Barby was registered at a summer girl's camp. Weiss, Winston, Gordon, and Shannon, the other staff scientists, were away on various projects. So the four "treasure hunters" had welcomed an excuse to go off on a venture of their own.

They would have a wonderful time, Rick thought, and who knew? They might even find the treasure!

Scotty had been looking through the binoculars again. He gave Rick a grin. "I take it all back," he said. "There's an island ahead."

The scientists leaned forward eagerly, and Rick strained to see. Sure enough, in a few moments they began to make out the island on the horizon ahead. Rick had enough confidence in his navigation to be certain that it was Clipper Cay.

The group had spent the night in Puerto Rico, then departed early in order to fly off the direct route for an advance look at Clipper Cay. Rick didn't intend to land. He would circle the island once or twice, then head again for Charlotte Amalie on the island of St. Thomas.

Scotty asked, "Where does the word 'cay' come from, anyway?"

Tony Briotti answered. "It's from the Spanish, Scotty. It means island, or islet. However, the Spanish got it from the Taino people, who were the Indians of the Antilles."

The island was close enough now so that they could discern its shape. Rick saw that it formed a rough crescent, running from north to south. It was about a mile long, perhaps a half mile wide at its greatest width, tapering to the horns of the crescent. He saw also that the color of the water changed gradually from the fathomless blue of the ocean to the green of shallow water.

Inwardly excited, he put the nose of the plane down and let the small craft pick up speed. Scotty grinned his pleasure, and Rick knew that his pal was just as excited in spite of his joking skepticism.

Rick leveled off at an altitude of four thousand feet and put the plane in a wide circle. Zircon leaned over Tony to look out the window, and Rick had to compensate in a hurry because the big scientist's weight threw the plane out of trim. Then Scotty, just as eager, leaned over to Rick's side and the trim had to be corrected again.

The island was a travel agent's wildest dream. The blue water gradually shifted to green, then lighter green, and finally the white of lovely beaches on both sides of the island. Lines of surf marked the position of reefs off both shores.

Somewhere along the western reef was the wreck of the *Maiden Hand.* Rick wondered if they would

have diver's luck and locate the ancient bark, and at the same moment he was sure they would.

"Plenty of vegetation," Briotti remarked.

"Probably palms, perhaps some mangrove," Zircon agreed. "Take us down for a closer look, Rick."

Rick obliged by standing the Sky Wagon up on a wing and sliding down as quickly as safe flying allowed. He, too, wanted a closer look. He cast a glance at his gas gauge. There was enough fuel, with a margin of safety, unless he got too enthusiastic about lingering around the island.

He leveled off again at a thousand feet and flew up the east coast, between the outer reef and the beach. This was the Atlantic side of the island, and the surf on the reef was heavy.

"Cottages," Scotty called. "Look!"

They counted seven on the eastern side of the island, most of them near the middle. It was hard to see details among the palms, but they seemed small and unpainted, like fishermen's shacks. Rick reversed course and flew down the western side and they counted five more. One fairly pretentious beach house was near the northern tip of the island. In general, the houses on the western side seemed better kept, and slightly larger. A few houses had small docks. Off the southern tip of the island, on the western side, a boat was trolling. The occupants waved as Rick flew over.

"Wonder which house is ours?" Scotty asked.

They didn't know, of course. Arrangements for a

beach house had been made for them by a friend of Zircon's, and not until they landed at Charlotte Amalie would they get the details. The same friend, Dr. Paul Ernst, had also arranged for a boat, to be used as a diving tender.

Rick was tempted to land in the smooth water off the western shore. The Sky Wagon had been equipped with pontoons for that very purpose. They had realized that no landing place would be available on the cay for a wheeled aircraft. But there was little to be gained by landing now when they didn't even know which house would be theirs.

Besides, there were supplies and equipment to be picked up and charts to be obtained, and the Sky Wagon needed to have the tank topped off, since they couldn't very well carry aviation gas to the island.

Reluctantly, Rick asked, "Anyone want to see anything else?"

"Not me," Hobart Zircon said flatly. "I want to get to Charlotte Amalie so we can get started back. That water looks clear enough to drink."

"See any sign of wrecks on the bottom?" Tony inquired.

No one had. No one had looked. They were too interested in getting an over-all view of Clipper Cay.

Rick set his course for St. Thomas. Now that he thought about it, he was rather pleased with himself. The flight from Spindrift was the longest single trip he had ever taken in the Sky Wagon. The party had

stopped for fuel as needed and had stayed overnight as darkness overtook them along the way. He had hit every destination on the nose, on time. And now the end of the trip was in sight without a single incident to mar its smoothness.

In a short time the mountains of St. Thomas rose out of the sea, and soon afterward Rick circled high above the colorful roofs of Charlotte Amalie. He switched on his radio and asked for seaplane landing instructions. The airfield directed him to the proper landing place, a beach and pier at the edge of the city. Then Scotty took over the mike and, while Rick started in for a landing, asked the airfield tower to phone Dr. Paul Ernst, Zircon's friend, and notify him of their arrival.

Apparently the tower operator phoned immediately, because as Rick taxied toward the dock, Zircon saw his friend waiting. Following the instructions of a dockman, Rick beached the Sky Wagon and cut the engine. Two husky Virgin Islanders hauled the ship higher onto the beach, and the Spindrifters climbed out.

Dr. Ernst was a small, bespectacled man with a shock of unruly white hair. He looked like a country doctor—which was reasonable enough, Rick thought, because that's just about what he was. Charlotte Amalie, with a population of about 11,500, could not be described as a big city.

The doctor greeted them all cordially, then immediately got down to business. "I'm sorry you are

not remaining in Charlotte Amalie. However, Hobart, I have done as you requested. For tonight I have reservations for you at one of our oldest hotels, Alexander's Rest. Named for Alexander Hamilton, of course."

Rick remembered that the Revolutionary hero had been brought up in the Virgin Islands.

"The beach cottage is waiting at Clipper Cay. It is on the western side, the third from the southern tip of the island. You shall have my own boat. I think you will find it ideal for a diving tender. I call it the *Water Witch.* An attractive name, is it not? I have checked on your equipment. It is held at the warehouse in my name. The supplies you wished to buy here have been ordered and are waiting at Andersen's Supply House. I have told them you will be calling."

The group listened, delighted at the obvious efficiency with which Dr. Ernst had taken care of Zircon's requests.

By lunchtime they had picked up their equipment and supplies, Scotty had tested the twin diesel engines on the *Water Witch* and announced himself more than pleased, Rick had checked over the aqualungs and compressor that had come down with his camera and other equipment by freight, the supplies had been stowed, the Sky Wagon refueled, and nothing remained but to check in at the hotel. This, they had decided, could wait until after lunch.

While the scientists drove off in Dr. Ernst's car to

pick up the doctor at his office, Rick and Scotty walked into town, headed for "The Danish Pastry" where the group was to meet for lunch.

Rick spoke his amazement. "Look at us," he marveled. "Ready to go. No trouble, no strain, no pain. Ever see an expedition get off to such a smooth start? We can't lose, Scotty. After a beginning like this we couldn't help finding the treasure."

Scotty grinned his agreement. "I didn't ask," he said, "but I wouldn't be surprised if the good Dr. Ernst hasn't done some advance diving and marked the statue's location with a buoy hung around its neck, just to make things easier for us!"

"Twenty fathoms," Rick said reflectively. "That's a lot of water. Besides, we don't know how accurate Captain Campion's guess was. We may be getting into water that's too deep for us."

Which, though unknowing, was one of the most prophetic remarks he had ever made.

CHAPTER II

The Scuba Slip

CHARLOTTE AMALIE had color. It was an old community, dating back to Danish ownership of the Virgin Islands, and there was a feeling of antiquity underneath the color of the tropics. There was no sharp lines to buildings; everything had a pleasant weathered look.

"Friendly folks," Scotty observed, after the tenth passer-by had bidden them a good day. "Doesn't seem to matter whether they're rich or poor. They look happy, and they're certainly polite."

"I like it," Rick agreed. "Those colored roofs get me." He stumbled on a cobblestone and added, "But the street could stand improving. Cobbles are fine for horses, maybe, but they're hard on cars."

"What do they do here for a living?" Scotty asked. "Wish we had Chahda along. He could reel off the straight dope from his *Worrold Alm-in-ack.*" Their Indian friend, Chahda, was at home in Bombay and

they hadn't heard from him in some time. His ability to quote from *The World Almanac,* which he had memorized, had caused the boys considerable amusement, even while they appreciated having a kind of walking encyclopedia with them.

They passed a fruit stand where women were shopping for mangoes, soursops, and other delicious-looking things, including sugar cane. "That's part of it," Rick said. "Sugar. This is also the headquarters for bay rum."

Scotty's eyebrows went up. "*Bay* rum?" He stepped out of the way to let an ancient woman on a donkey go by. "What's the bay part of it?"

Rick shrugged. "Search me. Anyway, you don't drink it, you put it on your face. I guess it was originally distilled from bayberry trees or something. Anyway—" He stopped suddenly as Scotty's fingers sank into his arm.

"Look!" Scotty exclaimed.

Rick looked, and let out a yell. "Steve! Steve Ames!" In the next moment he could have bitten his tongue out, because it was entirely possible that Steve wasn't traveling under his own identity.

Ames was an athletic-looking young man in a white suit and Panama hat. He stopped at Rick's hail, turned, and waited for the boys to catch up. His face split in a pleased grin.

Rick breathed his relief. Evidently Steve didn't mind being called by name.

The boys knew Steve as Spindrift's contact with

JANIG, the Joint Army-Navy Intelligence Group for which Spindrift had worked in the past, once to solve *The Whispering Box Mystery,* and again to track down the secret of *The Caves of Fear.*

"Wonder what he's doing here?" Scotty muttered.

"We'll soon find out," Rick said.

Steve greeted them cordially. "What brings you two wanderers to these shores?"

"We were about to ask the same of you," Rick returned.

Steve grinned at the obvious curiosity in the boys' faces. "Nothing very exciting. I'm here on a little vacation. Swimming."

"What kind of swimming?" Scotty wanted to know.

"Oh, skin diving, mostly."

"Gosh, that's wonderful!" Rick exclaimed. "Scuba or snorkel?"

There was the barest of hesitations before Steve replied. "Snorkel. There's nothing that's more fun than snorkeling around the reefs. That's the only way to swim in waters like these. You can get right down among the fish."

Rick saw Scotty's mouth open to point out Steve's error, but he stepped on his friend's foot and said quickly, "We're here for the swimming, too. Maybe we can join forces."

He knew the answer would be no. Steve wasn't vacationing; he was on a case. A vacationing skin diver would know that a snorkel is nothing but a tube that allows a swimmer to float face down on the sur-

face of the water while looking for something to dive after. Once the dive starts, the snorkel has no purpose, since its short length only allows it to project a few inches above the surface while a diver is floating face down. On the other hand, the Scuba—Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus, like the boys' aqualungs, really does allow the diver to get down among the fish.

"Thanks for the invitation," Steve said. He smiled. "I don't usually try a cover story unless I have it down cold. Just for my future guidance, where did I slip? Your faces were quite a study."

Rick told him. Steve nodded. "Thanks. I just got here on the morning plane, and I haven't been briefed yet. By tonight I'll be an expert on skin diving."

The statement only whetted further Rick's oversharp curiosity. If Steve was to be briefed on skin diving, it sounded like a case that would interest him and Scotty.

Steve continued to smile. "I don't want to linger too long. Want to give me a hand?"

Rick refrained from shouting and merely nodded his head. Scotty, with only slightly less restraint, said, "You know we do."

"Fine. Don't look. In the doorway of the tailor shop is a dark-complexioned man in a gray sharkskin suit. He's a tail. He picked me up at the airport. I don't know the town well enough to lose him easily

in broad daylight. Never been here before today. Take him out for me?"

Rick and Scotty nodded. Neither looked toward the doorway. "How will we get in touch with you?" Rick asked.

Steve hesitated. "There's no one I'd rather see more of, and no one I'd rather have on my side. But this case is not for you. Just do me this favor, then forget you saw me."

"You never know when you'll need help," Rick pointed out. "We won't horn in, but it won't do any harm to know how we can reach other. Tonight we'll be at a hotel called Alexander's Rest. Tomorrow we take off for an island called Clipper Cay."

"All right. If you really need to reach me, call the duty officer at the UDT base and leave a message. I'll get it."

Rick turned slightly. In a plate-glass window across the street he could see a reflection of the tailor shop Steve had mentioned, and he could make out the form of a man in the shadowed doorway. He estimated that the shop was about fifty feet away.

Scotty was also measuring the situation. He said, "Walk away from us so the tail will have to come by."

Steve nodded. He shook hands, gave them each a grin, and was gone.

Rick said loudly, "Give me your shoulder to lean on. I've got a rock in my shoe."

Scotty obliged, and Rick half turned as he did so.

He saw the man in the gray sharkskin suit saunter out of the doorway and start toward them.

Rick balanced on one leg, one hand on Scotty's shoulder, the other hand fumbling with the shoelace on his lifted foot.

The tail walked toward them, unfolding a paper as he did so. He was apparently devoting his full attention to the paper; his actions said he didn't even know the boys existed.

"You ought to get tighter shoes," Scotty observed. "Then you wouldn't get stones in them."

"Save the advice," Rick grunted. "I've got a knot in the lace."

The man came abreast of them, between Rick and the building, and in that moment, clawing wildly for balance, Rick lost his hold on Scotty's shoulder. He fell squarely against the man in the gray suit and crushed him into the building.

"Hey!" the man yelled. "What's the idea?"

Scotty rushed to the rescue, took the fallen shadow by the shoulders, and tried to pull him to his feet. This only made matters worse, since Rick was stretched across his legs.

"I'm so sorry," Scotty said. "Gosh, I'm sorry. He slipped. Here. Let me help you up."

"Get off me," the man yelled.

Rick tried, lost his balance again, and fell against the man's chest, pinning him to the sidewalk.

Scotty groaned. "Rick! You clumsy ox. Get off the man!"

Pretending to lose his balance, Rick fell squarely against the man

"I'm trying to," Rick said plaintively. "My shoe came off. Here. Help me up."

"Help yourself!" Scotty returned sharply. "I'm trying to help this gentleman."

Rick rolled clear and Scotty got the man to his feet. He was something less than spotlessly clean, thanks to the dust of the road, and there was a rip in the arm of his coat.

"Look at that!" Scotty exclaimed. He made ineffectual efforts to dust the man off. "Rick, you ripped his coat."

Rick looked embarrassed. "I'm terribly sorry. Here, sir. Let me take you to this tailor shop. We can have it repaired in a jiffy."

"Forget it!" the man snapped. "And get out of my way. I'm in a hurry."

"It was all my fault, and I refuse to take no for an answer," Rick said firmly. He took the man by the arm. "Come on. It will only take a moment. You can't walk around town like that. I insist on having your suit repaired. I'm sure that the tailor can mend it so no one would ever notice."

"No," the man grated. "Please stand aside." Both boys had managed to block the sidewalk.

"Please," Rick pleaded. "This is terribly upsetting. We really should have the damage to your suit repaired."

The man's dark complexion was turning a grayish pink with rage. Rick estimated quickly. If he knew Steve Ames, the JANIG agent was long gone, and the

tail would not catch up with him again. They had delayed the shadow for perhaps two minutes, but for Steve that would be enough.

Rick stepped aside. "Very well. If you insist—"

"I do." The man brushed by and hurried off.

The boys looked at each other and grinned.

"He won't catch Steve," Rick said.

"Not a chance. Well, my clumsy friend, shall we put your shoe back on and go meet the others for lunch?"

"We shall," Rick returned. "Indeed we shall." He slipped his shoe on and tied it quickly. "Wasn't it interesting, where Steve said we could reach him?"

Steve had said at the UDT base. That meant simply at the home of the Navy frogmen—the Underwater Demolition Teams. No wonder Steve had said he would be an expert on skin diving by nightfall. He was going to be with the most expert experts of all.

Rick sighed. "Just our luck he doesn't want us in the case. Wouldn't it be great to work with the Navy frogmen? We could learn plenty."

"Forgetting St. Francis?" Scotty inquired. "There he lies, twenty fathoms down, probably covered with barnacles and waiting to be rescued. And you want to go fogging off with the frogmen."

"All right, all right! Don't rub it in. We'll go back to being interested in the bark *Maiden Hand.* And St. Francis. And pirates. Let's cast off, my hearty."

The Danish Pastry was only a few blocks away,

and Dr. Ernst and the Spindrifters were already seated. The boys joined them, with apologies for being late, but without mentioning their meeting with Steve Ames. There was nothing to be gained by bringing the matter up in front of Dr. Ernst. They could tell Zircon and Tony later. Zircon knew Steve, but Tony didn't.

Over dessert, Dr. Ernst reached into his bag and brought forth a chart. "I thought you might need this," he said.

It was a detailed chart of Clipper Cay and the surrounding waters. It showed clearly the position of the reefs, and it gave soundings that showed the depths.

Zircon shook his massive head. "Paul, your thoroughness has never failed to amaze me. What would we have done without you?"

Ernst smiled his pleasure. "Thank you, Hobart. I try to be thorough. Besides, I want you all to have a pleasant recollection of the Virgin Islands. We who live here love them very much."

The boys and Tony echoed Zircon's thanks, then fell to a study of the chart.

It was apparent that the water deepened rapidly beyond the western reef. In a few places, the twenty-fathom line was only a short distance out.

"Have you any idea where this ship went down?" Dr. Ernst asked.

"A bare idea," Tony replied. "It was off the west-

ern shore of the island, probably close to the reef, in twenty fathoms. The bark had been hit and was sinking. The captain ran for the island with the hope of beaching the ship on the reef, but he never made it. The bark went down, and Anne Bonney's pirates picked up the survivors."

"We know of Anne Bonney here," Dr. Ernst told them. "You realize that the Virgin Islands were once a hangout for pirates? Oh, we have a dark and bloody history, what with piracy, slave rebellions, even Indian massacres."

"You'd never know it," Rick said. "This is the most peaceful place I've seen in years."

He didn't add that the peace was only apparent. Steve Ames wasn't needed in really peaceful places. Something was stirring under the tropical calm of St. Thomas.

"Tonight you must have a taste of St. Thomas home life," Dr. Ernst said. "You shall be my guests at dinner. Dr. Briotti will be interested in my collection of Indian pottery. And you young men will be interested in my wife's hobby, which is fish. She has an amazing collection."

"Alive?" Scotty asked.

"Yes, indeed. In salt-water aquariums. Our misfortune makes it easy. You see, we have no natural fresh-water supplies on St. Thomas. We depend on catching rain for our drinking water. So our plumbing is operated by sea water, of which we have

plenty. As a result, Mrs. Ernst is able to have a constant supply of salt water flowing through her aquariums. I know you'll be interested."

The boys agreed. Mrs. Ernst's hobby sounded like fun.

After lunch Dr. Ernst departed for his office, leaving the Spindrift group to their own devices. Not much remained to be done, except for checking in at their hotel. For now, they were content to walk around town.

As they passed the post office where Alexander Hamilton had once been a clerk, Scotty smiled meaningfully at Rick.

"Steve lost a tail this morning. Remember?"

Rick looked at him doubtfully. "Of course. Why?"

"Somebody loses, somebody gains," Scotty replied cheerfully. "Don't look behind you, but we've found one!"

CHAPTER III

The Shadow

THE two scientists had been walking ahead of Rick and Scotty, but Zircon's keen ears had overheard the boys' remarks. However, he was too wise to make his interest obvious. He waited until the group passed a store with a large display, then stopped, as though to examine it.

Rick found himself surveying a collection of tools for the do-it-yourself addict.

"What's this about Steve and a tail?" Zircon asked. He pointed at a power-drill set, as though discussing it. His normally loud voice couldn't have been heard five feet away.

Rick shook his head, then pointed at a different drill set. Anyone watching would have thought the tools were the subject of conversation. Rick quickly outlined what had happened and concluded, "Scotty spotted a tail on us a few minutes ago. Same guy?"

Scotty bent down for a closer look at a series of

wood power bits. His voice was scarcely audible. "Not the same one. This one is a Virgin Islander. Looks like a farmer. When we stopped he walked right on by. He's out of sight now. But he'll pick us up as soon as we start."

Tony Briotti, to whom this kind of adventure was new, asked, "What do we do about it?"

"Nothing," Zircon answered. "Steve Ames wanted to get rid of his shadow and the boys helped him out. But we have no particular reason for wanting to get rid of ours. Let him follow. Undoubtedly whoever is tailing Steve got interested when they saw him talking with the boys, but they'll learn nothing by trailing us."

"And it's one less for Steve to contend with," Rick added.

Scotty straightened up. "I have to admit this bunch of tools is beginning to bore me a little. Where are we going?"

Zircon shrugged. "I have nothing in mind. We might check in at the hotel."

"I'd rather swim," Rick said.

"Same here." Scotty made a quick survey of the street without seeming to do so. "No sign of our friend. He's probably in another doorway."

"Then Hobart and I might as well check in," Tony suggested. "I'd like a swim, but frankly I'm a little sleepy from too much lunch."

"How about checking in for us?" Rick asked. "Then

we could get right into the water. No need for all of us to go to the hotel."

The scientists agreed, and at Scotty's suggestion hailed a taxi. As the car rolled off toward the boat where their luggage was stored, Scotty grinned. "This was the only taxi in sight. Wonder how our friend will manage to follow us?"

He had his answer at the pier. While Zircon was piling their overnight bags into the taxi, a farmer rode past on a bicycle. He didn't look at them. "There he goes," Scotty said. "Pretty easy after all. Guess the town is small enough so he wasn't worried about finding us."

"We'll give him a choice to make when Tony and I leave." Zircon smiled. "Let's see whether he stays with you, or follows us."

Not until the boys had changed to swimming trunks in the cabin of the *Water Witch* did they find the answer to Zircon's question. The shadow had decided to stay with them. This time it was Rick who spotted him. The shadow was nearly hidden beyond a curve in the shore line. To anyone not aware of being tailed, he would have appeared to be like any of the other casual figures that went unhurriedly about their business in the neighborhood. If Scotty hadn't pointed him out, Rick would not have suspected that the shadow had the slightest interest in the Spindrift party.

"We going to rig the aqualungs?" Scotty asked.

"Let's not bother. Masks, snorkels, and fins. We can swim out and take a look at some of the coral heads."

"How about a gun?"

Rick considered. "I guess not. We don't want to do any hunting. But you might take a hand spear in case something real inviting shows up. And let's take our knives." He had also decided against taking his camera. A leisurely, unencumbered swim was what he wanted. There would be time enough for hunting fish or taking pictures later, when they got to Clipper Cay.

While Scotty went into the cabin to select a spear from their assortment of fishing gear, Rick surveyed the *Water Witch* with satisfaction. It was a thirty-five-foot craft with a small cabin forward and a spacious cockpit aft. It had been used as a diving tender before, apparently, because there was a ladder that could be swung outboard for a diver to use. There was also a small boom that could be rigged quickly for handling cargo or lifting gear from the water.

The fuel tanks were ample for their purposes. One filling would be more than sufficient for a round trip to Clipper Cay plus any cruising they would do while at the island. The tanks were full.

Water capacity, an important consideration on waterless Clipper Cay, was more than adequate. In addition to a built-in fifty-gallon tank in the cabin, there was a rack of five ten-gallon jerry cans in the cockpit.

Scotty emerged from the cabin with a short, low-powered spring gun. "Thought I might as well bring a light gun," he said. "It's just as easy to carry as a spear."

"Okay." Rick led the way down the pier to the beach, carrying his mask, snorkel, and slippers. These he placed carefully on one of the Sky Wagon's pontoons, in order to protect the clear glass of his mask from any possible scratching. Then, with a yell to Scotty to hurry, he bounded through the shallows, threw himself forward, and planed along the surface of the water. Lifting his head for a quick breath, he dove under, feeling the wonderful coolness of the water close over him. He judged its temperature quickly. It was close to eighty degrees, he estimated, and cool only by comparison with the warm air.

He reversed course quickly and stood up. Scotty was also in the water.

"I'm glad we didn't bother with suits," Rick said. "In water like this we'd even be too warm in mid-season suits."

Because of the coldness of the water off the New Jersey coast, the boys had equipped themselves with full, waterproof rubber suits under which long underwear was worn, and with lighter "midseason" suits of foam neoprene. Because of the reported warmth of water in the Virgin Islands they hadn't added the suits to their already heavy load of supplies.

They returned to the beach, picked up their equipment, and took it into the water. Rick sat down and

rinsed out his flippers, then carefully removed the last traces of sand from his feet. He pulled the flippers on, adjusting them for maximum comfort. His face mask was next. He spat into it, then rubbed the saliva over the glass. This rather unsanitary-appearing trick was essential, since saliva is an excellent antifogging compound needed to help keep the glass clear underwater. Then he rinsed his mask lightly and adjusted the head straps, leaving the mask on his forehead.

The snorkels used by the boys were plastic tubes curved at both ends. At one end was a mouthpiece; at the other was a cage that held a rubber ball. A dive or rough wave action floated the ball upward, closing the tube and preventing water entry. Rick and Scotty adjusted the rubber bands of their snorkels around their heads above the mask straps.

Scotty was ready. He slipped his mask into place, molded the soft rubber skirt of the mask to the contours of his face, inhaled through his nose to make sure the seal was airtight, then called, "Let's go!" He gripped the mouthpiece of his snorkel between his teeth, the rubber flange under his lips, and slid into the water.

Rick was right behind him. As his mask touched water he saw the white coral sand of the bottom a few inches down. The only sign of life was a hermit crab, perhaps a half inch in length, dragging his home of the moment—a tiny spiral shell.

In one hand, Scotty carried the spear gun by its

pistol grip. He swam in the position that suited him best, both arms hanging limply down. Rick, on the other hand, preferred to swim with arms relaxed along his sides, as long as his hands were empty. When carrying a spear gun or his camera, he also swam with arms hanging downward. Neither boy used his arms for swimming. The rhythmic, powerful leg strokes were enough, thanks to the swim fins.

The water deepened rapidly but lost none of its clarity. Even at a depth of a dozen feet, Rick thought, he could have counted every grain of sand. This was unlike anything he had ever experienced. At home, visibility of five feet was considered good. Lost in the enjoyment of really clear water, he completely forgot about the shadow.

Scotty reminded him. He touched Rick's arm and signaled a stop. The boys removed their snorkel mouthpieces and faced each other upright in the water, holding position with easy flipper movements.

"Just pretend we're talking," Scotty said. "Don't look around. I'm trying to spot our friend over your shoulder." After a moment he shook his head. "No sign. Wonder if he ran for a bathing suit?"

"Forget him. Let's swim. See any coral heads?"

"Darker water off yonder. Let's look."

They readjusted their snorkels and headed in the direction Scotty had indicated.

Rick breathed easily through his tube, constantly scanning the bottom. Now and then he saw various kinds of debris on the bottom, including abandoned

beer cans and a section of newspaper that had not yet rotted away. Rubbish like this was to be expected in a harbor, he supposed, still it was as unattractive to a swimmer as junk along the roadside is to the motorist.

Suddenly he noticed a fish—the first he had seen. He took a deep breath and dove by letting his head drop and then lifting his legs to a nearly vertical position. He slid underwater without a splash. When his fins were below the surface he started his leg motion again, and the flippers propelled him smoothly downward.

The fish was perhaps a foot long, silvery, with a pointed nose and yellow fins. Rick couldn't identify it. The fish was busily rooting in the sand for morsels of food and paid no attention to the diver until Rick reached out and almost touched it, then it sped just beyond reach and commenced rooting again.

His curiosity satisfied for the moment, Rick surfaced and rejoined Scotty. As he took position at his friend's side, the other boy hooted once, their signal for "attention." The hooting was done by making a kind of "hooty" groan into the snorkel mouthpiece, about the only sound that could be made without letting water pass the lips. Because water conducted sound so well, the hoot could be heard clearly some distance away.

Rick lifted his face from the water and saw that Scotty was pointing to an area a short distance to their right. He followed Scotty's lead and saw the

reason for the signal. It was a rocky, coral-covered area about thirty feet square and perhaps fifteen feet below the surface.

The boys swam directly over it, then floated motionless, watching the activity below. At first glance, there appeared to be only a pair of odd-shaped filefish nibbling at the formation, but as their vision adjusted they made out literally dozens of tiny, colorful fish in clefts, under overhangs, or waiting motionless against a patch of color on the rocks. Rick pointed to a school of about ten vivid little fish of electric-blue color. The largest was less than two inches long. Scotty hooted for attention and pointed in his turn to a section of the rock that held over a dozen sea urchins that looked like black horse chestnuts with exaggerated spines.

Rick watched a pair of brown doctorfish about eight inches long swim by below, then his attention was attracted by a brilliant red squirrelfish peering out of a cleft. He pointed the red fish out to Scotty, who in turn showed him where a little moray was peering out of a hole near the base of the rock.

Rick was fascinated. If a tiny patch of rock held this amount of life, what must the real reefs be like off Clipper Cay? He was suddenly impatient to get going, to put on his aqualung and explore the reef from top to bottom. And if they should really find the wreck of the *Maiden Hand,* there was every chance that the exploration of the wreck and the sea life it had acquired would more than compensate for

the treasure none of them really hoped to find anyway. What a vacation!

He was suddenly conscious of a throb in his ears. He listened and tried to identify it. A motorboat of some kind, but it didn't sound like a very powerful one. He lifted his head and searched for it.

Scotty, too, had heard the boat. He began to tread water, lifting his mask, then rinsing it because it had fogged a little.

Rick spotted the boat. It looked like a large rowboat, powered with an outboard motor, and it was headed in their direction.

Scotty took his snorkel out of his mouth. "Better stay topside and watch. We don't want to start our vacation by getting run over."

"Too true," Rick said. "Isn't this great? I've never seen so many kinds of small fish in one place in my life. Wait until we get out to the reefs where the big ones are."

Scotty patted his spear gun. "I'll keep us supplied with fresh sea food. Wonder if there are any lobsters around?"

But Rick had stopped listening. "Scotty, that guy is heading right for us!"

The boat was getting close, and through his face plate Rick could make out the figure of a single occupant.

Scotty suddenly gripped his arm. "Rick! It's our shadow!"

Rick started. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I don't like this. What would he come out here for? Get ready to dive." Scotty pulled his mask into place and molded it to his face, then gripped his snorkel between his teeth.

Rick followed suit and leveled off in the water in diving position, but he hesitated, waiting to see what the boat would do.

It didn't take long to find out. The boat stayed on a perfectly straight course, headed directly for them. Rick waited. Perhaps the shadow intended to sheer off when he got close. He might have come out to talk with them.

Scotty hooted four times, their signal for danger! Then he went under. Still Rick hesitated, until it was clear that the boat did not intend to swerve. He saw the shadow's face, set in grim lines, then his legs went up and he slid under, using his hands as well as his legs to pull himself down to safety. He thought incredulously, "He tried to run us down!"

A dozen feet under he turned over on his back and saw the bright circle of the propeller and its trail of foam. The boat was past. He shot to the surface and filled his lungs with air, waiting for the next move.

The boat spun around in a tight turn and headed back.

Scotty surfaced next to Rick, pulled the snorkel from his mouth, and gritted, "Swim away. Let him use you for a target. I'm going to get that son of a spiny sea walrus."

Rick saw from the position of the spear in Scotty's

gun that his friend had charged the weapon during the dive. He nodded, then turned and swam away, flippers flailing as though trying to hurry. He watched over his shoulder and saw the boat head for him.

He was breathing hard from the excitement now, but he took a deep breath and got ready to dive. But still he swam, leading the rapidly overtaking boat until it was almost on him. Only then did he shoot downward, twisting as he went. He looked back in time to see Scotty sight the spear gun and fire as the boat went past.

At first Rick thought his pal had missed, then he realized what Scotty had done. The spear shaft was attached to a long wire leader, and the leader to a safety line coiled around a spool just ahead of the pistol grip. Scotty had deliberately fired ahead of the propeller, knowing that the wire leader would be caught and would wrap around the shaft.

Rick saw the spear stop short as the wire caught, saw it hauled back against the propeller and drop free as the prop blades cut it loose. Scotty shot up for a breath, then dove instantly, toward the rapidly falling spear.

Rick had to breathe himself. He surfaced, caught a quick breath, then went under again. Scotty was picking up the spear. Rick saw him place it in the gun barrel, swing the loader over the razor-sharp harpoon head, and shove down on the spring. In a moment the

gun was loaded again. Luckily the spear had not bent when the prop blade hit it.

The boat had come to a halt, the engine dead. The propeller could no longer turn against the wrapping of wire and heavy fishline. Scotty hooted twice, their signal to surface, and Rick followed him up. Near the surface they separated, Rick taking the side of the boat away from his friend. He longed for a weapon, even a hand spear. But he was helpless. Scotty would have to get in the first blow with the gun. But, Rick thought, that might give him time to get over the gunwale to grapple with the shadow.

His head broke water. He pulled the snorkel from his mouth and let it hang. As luck would have it, the shadow saw him first. He stood up, oar in hands, poised for a swing at Rick's head.

Scotty's voice stopped the swing. "Don't do it or you'll get three feet of steel through you!"

The man turned and faced the needle point of Scotty's spear. The oar dropped from his hands.

Rick gulped his relief. Apparently the shadow had no weapon.

"Jump overboard!" Scotty ordered.

The man hesitated. Scotty thrust the spear gun forward. "Jump, I said!"

The shadow did, and sank in a flurry of bubbles. When he rose to the surface again, the point of the spear was against his back. "Hang on to the boat with both hands," Scotty directed.

Rick got to his side with a kick of the flippers and ran his hands over the man's clothing. He found a switch knife, which he put in his belt. "He's clean," he said. "No other weapons."

"Take a look in the boat," Scotty suggested.

Rick did so, lifting himself up on the gunwale. There was nothing in the boat but oars and a can of gasoline.

"Want to tell us why you tried to run us down?" Rick asked.

The shadow merely stared.

"Talk," Scotty ordered, "or I'll put this spear through you."

The man spoke, and his accent was the soft speech of the island. "No, you won't. I could explain running down swimmers by accident, but you could never explain putting a spear through a man in a boat. You don't want that kind of trouble."

Scotty grinned at the truth of it. "Okay," he said. "Just one thing. Don't push us too far. Stay in the water until we're ashore, and don't try to overtake us."

"Better heed that advice," Rick warned. "Come on, Scotty. Let's go." He put his snorkel in place.

Scotty moved to his side. "Welcome to the hospitable waters of St. Thomas," he said. "What say we look up some friendly sharks before we go ashore?"

CHAPTER IV

Visitors by Night

RICK and Scotty stood on the pier and watched their erstwhile shadow row slowly toward another pier some distance away.

"We probably should have tied him up and called the police," Rick remarked.

"It wouldn't have gotten us anything," Scotty disagreed. "He could always claim he didn't see us in the water. After all, it wouldn't be the first time divers had been run over by motorboats."

"It's too late now, anyway. Let's dress, then go to the hotel and tell Zircon and Tony about this."

As they dressed in the small cabin of the *Water Witch,* Rick spoke aloud the question that had been bothering him. "What did he have to gain by running us down? That's what puzzles me. It was a stupid thing to try, because he didn't really have much chance of getting both of us, or even one, once he failed to catch us by surprise."

"He wasn't very well prepared for murder, either," Scotty added. "No weapons except a switch knife."

Rick nodded agreement. "He was desperate," he concluded. "Suddenly he had to take a chance on getting us. He must have known it wasn't much of a chance. Either he lost his head, or he wasn't very bright. What could have made him try?"

Scotty had no answer, nor could Rick even hazard a reasonable guess.

They locked the cabin of the *Water Witch,* walked into town, and found a taxi. Their shadow did not show up again, and if a new tail had replaced him, the new one was too good to be spotted. However, the boys doubted that they were being followed.

"I just don't get it," Rick said for the twentieth time. "Our friend must have lost his head. Otherwise he'd have waited on shore and continued to follow us when we came out of the water."

"We'll probably never know," Scotty returned. "After all, we'll be gone in the morning."

"I know. But meanwhile, we'd better have eyes in the back of our heads."

The taxi discharged them in front of Alexander's Rest and they climbed out and surveyed the hotel with interest.

Scotty spoke first. "Alexander's Rest? Which Alexander? The Great, or Hamilton? If it was Hamilton, as Dr. Ernst said, he must have built it personally."

It was a two-story frame structure that had definitely seen better days. On closer inspection Rick

decided that the second story had been added as an afterthought. It looked like the second layer of a poorly constructed cake.

Inside, however, the hotel proved to be very comfortable. It was cool, and the rooms were large and clean. The boys learned that they had been registered in a twin bedroom on the second floor, while Zircon and Briotti were on the first floor.

The boys found the scientists attired only in shorts, cooling off over long, cold drinks. They accepted glasses of iced ginger ale and told the scientists of their adventure.

"It's amazing." Tony Briotti shook his head. "Do you realize that you two are a phenomenon? I should write you up for one of the scientific journals."

"You mean because we turned the tables on the shadow?" Scotty asked.

"No. Because you're adventure-prone. Did you ever hear of people who are accident-prone?"

Zircon chuckled. "A good observation of these two. I agree absolutely, Tony. They are adventure-prone."

Rick sighed. "All right. What's the joke?"

"None. I'm quite serious." Tony found more ice for his glass. "Insurance statistics show that certain people are accident-prone. Accidents happen to them. They're going along minding their own business and bang! A streetcar jumps the tracks and hits them. Or they step into open manholes. They're the kind of people who always manage to be walking under things when workmen drop tools."

"And you," Zircon concluded, "are adventure-prone in the same way. Consider this. Had you walked down the street either a minute earlier or later this morning you would not have seen Steve Ames. It's quite likely that you would never have known of his presence in town. But what happens? You walk right into an adventure. One thing leads to another, and suddenly a stranger is trying to run you down with a motorboat."

"That's what bothers me," Rick replied. "There's no pattern. It just makes no sense."

"It doesn't have to," Tony Briotti said with a grin. "The Golden Skull pattern makes no sense, either. But you got us into more excitement than I knew was possible. You're just adventure-prone."

"And for the sake of my gray hair, stay out of trouble," Zircon pleaded. "Stay close to us until we get to Clipper Cay."

"It will be a pleasure," Rick assured him. "Only let us out of your sight long enough to shower, please. I'm sticky."

"We'll stay in the hotel," Scotty promised.

"Fine. I'll feel better about it if I know where you are. Suppose you come by in an hour and we'll have a quiet dinner at the Ernsts'."

Dinner was quiet but interesting. The Ernsts were excellent hosts, and both Dr. and Mrs. Ernst had many tales of the islands to tell. As the good doctor had promised, the boys enjoyed the wonderful variety of sea life Mrs. Ernst had collected to keep in salt-

water tanks. She identified for them a number of the smaller reef fishes, including clowns, demoiselles, and even the deadly scorpion fish.

The party broke up early, since the start for Clipper Cay was to be made at dawn by the scientists. The plan was for Zircon and Tony to make the trip in the *Water Witch*, with the boys flying over in the Sky Wagon. That way, both the plane and boat would be available. Zircon thought that fast trips to St. Thomas might be necessary to replenish supplies, and he added that he would be happier if the plane were available in case of accident. That way, the patient could be in Charlotte Amalie in a short time.

As the boys bade good night to the scientists and started up the stairs to their room, Rick asked, "Any sign of a shadow tonight?"

"Nope. Guess Steve's friends—or enemies—must have lost interest."

"I hope that you're right. As long as Steve ordered us to stay out of the case, I'll be glad when we get to the cay and get underwater. We have to find that precious gadget even if it takes two solid weeks of diving. If we don't, Barby will never let us forget it."

This last was uttered as Rick turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. He flicked on the light, then gave a sudden gasp.

The shadow and a stranger—in their room!

The boys looked into the muzzles of .38-caliber pistols.

"Come on in quietly," the stranger said. "Put your

hands on the tops of your heads and sit down on the bed over there."

The boys did so. They had no alternative. Rick's mind raced. Somehow they had to warn the scientists, and they had to get out from under the muzzles of the guns! What could these men want of them?

The stranger sat down on the other bed. His pistol muzzle was centered precisely on Rick's belt buckle. "We want information. Give it to us without any trouble and we'll go away. Give us a hard time and you'll regret it."

Rick studied the stranger. He was of medium height, dressed in tan slacks and sport shirt with a darker jacket. His face was ordinary. He might have been a store clerk, or streetcar conductor, or nearly anything. But Rick saw from the way his jacket fitted that he was powerfully built for his size, and his hands were lean and strong-looking. He had a heavy tan, as though he had spent many months in the sun.

"What do you want to know?" Scotty asked.

"Let's start with what you were saying when you walked in. Who is Barby?"

"My sister," Rick said. "She's at home, in New Jersey."

The stranger sighed. "I was afraid of this. Give us straight answers or you'll buy plenty of grief. Now, who is Barby? Who does he represent?"

"He told you," Scotty answered. "She's his sister."

The stranger tried a different tack. "How did you know where to swim today? Did Ames tell you?"

"No," Rick replied. "We just swam straight out from the pier looking for coral heads."

"Come on! You must have had some source of information. Who gave it to you?"

"We didn't have any source of information," Scotty protested. "We just went for a swim!"

The stranger lifted the pistol menacingly. "You'd better sing, and it better be straight. I'm warning you!"

"Warn all you like," Rick said angrily. "What do you want us to say?"

The shadow walked over and pulled back his fist.

"Lay off!" the stranger growled. "You've pulled enough stupid stunts for one day. You'll be lucky if the boss doesn't rip the hide off you."

The former tail subsided and glared at the boys.

The stranger rose. "All right. If you won't talk here, we'll take you where you will talk. Get up."

The boys looked at each other. Scotty raised his eyebrows. Rick grinned. He asked calmly, "Suppose we don't go?"

"You'll go!" the stranger snapped.

"I don't think we will," Scotty answered. "Look, mister. You're in a hotel. It's early, and there are people in the lobby. How far do you think you'd get if you tried to march us downstairs with a gun in your hand?"

"We're not going through the lobby," the stranger told them. "We're going the way we came—through the window. And you'll go quietly or we'll take our

chances. They might catch us, but you wouldn't care with a couple of slugs in you. Pete, go outside and wait. They'll come down one at a time. Keep them covered, and don't hesitate to shoot if they try anything."

The shadow slipped through the window, hung by his hands, and dropped.

The stranger's gun singled out Rick. "Get going."

Rick shrugged. There was nothing else to do but obey—at least for the moment. He looked at Scotty, and his pal made a small gesture to the right. Rick's forehead wrinkled. This was no signal he recognized, unless Scotty meant to jump to the right.

He swung a leg over the sill and looked down. The shadow was waiting, and the light from the window glinted dully off the gun in his hand. Rick went on out, then holding by his hands he gave a swing to the right and dropped. The gun covered him as he rose to his feet again.

"Against the wall!" the shadow hissed.

Rick dutifully moved back against the wall. The shadow was standing about six feet away.

Overhead, Scotty was climbing through the window now. Rick watched carefully as his pal lowered himself to full length, and swung *to the left.*

Instantly Rick divined Scotty's tactics. If the two boys were apart, the gun couldn't cover both of them at the same moment, and there would be an instant while the stranger jumped when only a single gun would be on them. And the shadow had already

shown that he wasn't the smartest man in the world. Rick slipped to the right a step or two while the shadow was distracted by Scotty's jump. Scotty fell to his knees, and in getting up he managed to put a few more feet between himself and Rick.

"Watch 'em!" The stranger's voice floated down. Rick glanced up and saw the stranger with one leg over the sill. He tensed.

Scotty said, "Listen, you mug . . ."

The shadow's head turned toward Scotty, and Rick left the ground in a wild spring. He struck the shadow, hand clawing for the gun. He found a wrist, and twisted, falling backward as he did so. The shadow, the entire weight of his own body on his wrist from the throw, screamed!

The gun landed on the ground. Rick let go and scrambled for it, but Scotty was there before him.

In the instant of the struggle the stranger had hesitated on the window sill, hand grabbing for the pistol he had tucked in his belt. He pulled it free and aimed at the struggling figures below, but in the gloom there was no way to distinguish friend from foe. And in that heartbeat, Scotty picked up the shadow's gun and fired one snap shot.

The stranger's gun dropped to the ground and he fell backward into the room.

Scotty thrust the pistol into the shadow's stomach. "Face the wall," he ordered. "Put your hands against it. Now support your weight on your hands."

The shadow did as ordered. Rick took the man's

legs and pulled them backward so that the shadow's whole weight was against his hands, his outstretched body forming the hypotenuse of a right triangle. The only way he could move to regain his balance was to lower himself to the ground and then get up.

Rick picked up the stranger's fallen pistol and hefted it. "Better see about the one upstairs," he advised. "I'll watch this one."

"I fired at his hand, but I was high," Scotty told him. "He got it in the shoulder. He won't get far."

Zircon and Briotti charged around the corner of the hotel in pajamas and slippers, followed by other guests and members of the hotel staff.

"We had a little trouble," Rick explained briefly.

The scientists took in the situation at a glance.

"As I said," Tony Briotti muttered. "Adventure-prone. And lucky! How do you beat a combination like that?"

CHAPTER V

The Warning

STEVE AMES walked into the hotel dining room accompanied by a young Navy lieutenant. He spotted the boys immediately and waved.

Rick breathed a sigh of relief. "There he is."

"We can turn this whole business over to him and then get out of here," Scotty returned.

The events of the night before had culminated in two phone calls, one by the hotel manager to the police, the other by Rick to Steve Ames. However, the duty officer at the UDT base had replied that Ames was not available. Rick had then asked for intelligence, and his query had gotten fast results. Steve Ames didn't show up, but Navy Shore Patrol officers did. The SP's had conferred with the local police, and the affair had ended with the shadow and the stranger, whom Scotty had potted in the shoulder, being carried off by both groups. First, however, the senior Shore Patrol officer had listened to their story, then

instructed the boys, "Wait for Steve Ames. Talk to no one else. The police won't ask any questions."

After conferring, the Spindrift group decided to go ahead with their plans. The scientists were anxious to transfer their activities to Clipper Cay, not only to get on with their vacation, but to get the boys away from the mysterious danger that dogged their footsteps in Charlotte Amalie.

The scientists had departed at dawn in the *Water Witch,* after extracting a promise from Rick and Scotty that they would not stir from the hotel until Steve Ames contacted them, and that they would then fly at once to Clipper Cay.

The wait had been a long one. It was now nearly noon, and the boys, hungry because their breakfast had been at daybreak, were ordering lunch.

Steve Ames sat down and motioned the lieutenant to a seat. "Jimmy, this is Rick Brant and Don Scott. Boys, Lieutenant Kelly. Have you ordered lunch?"

"We were just looking over the menu," Rick replied.

"Fine. We'll join you."

The four consulted menus, then ordered. Steve turned to Kelly. "Jimmy, being the athletic type, you've probably never heard of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation."

The lieutenant, a heavily tanned young man with crisp black hair, shook his head. "Sorry. I never have."

"Well, it's a reputable, highly competent and con-

servative group of some of the best scientific brains in the country. But somehow, these two got attached to it. They're not very conservative, although they're competent—especially at getting into trouble."

Kelly gave the boys a comradely grin. "If he talks that way, he must like you."

The boys grinned back. The lieutenant was likable.

"All right. Last I saw of you two, Rick was lying across the legs of the guy who had been tailing me. The next thing I heard, two men we've been keeping an eye on were in the hoosegow, one with a slug in his shoulder. And I also heard some wild tales of jumping out of windows. Now fill in the details."

Rick started from the moment they first noticed that a shadow had picked them up. He told the story in careful and accurate detail, knowing that Steve's trained mind might find significance in things that meant nothing to him. Now and then Scotty elaborated on a point.

When Rick concluded the recital, Steve cupped his chin in one hand and stared at them thoughtfully.

Kelly complimented them. "Sounds as if you took care of things like real professionals, both in the water and in the hotel. And I must say, I wish my people would learn to give reports like that."

The boys thanked him, and Scotty added, "I don't suppose you can tell us anything about what you do?"

"Sure I can. I'm not one of Steve's hush-hush crew. I'm a simple Navy lieutenant."

Rick chuckled. "In other words, you can't tell us."

Steve said, "He's executive officer of the UDT group here. And he's group intelligence officer. I might also add that he's brighter than he looks."

"Then what do you make of this business?" Scotty inquired.

"I'm not that bright," Kelly replied. "Seriously, this one has me stumped. First of all, it's easy to understand why a shadow picked you up. After all, it must have been obvious that you knocked Steve's tail off. So they simply picked you up instead, hoping that you'd lead them back to Steve, or that you might be important in some way they couldn't understand."

"It's nice to have someone do my thinking for me," Steve said. "Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Aye, aye, Sir. The tail stuck with you. When your party split in two, he decided to stay with you instead of Zircon and Briotti. There could be two reasons: First, you were the ones who contacted Steve on the street. Second, you stayed at the waterfront while the others went off in a taxi. I like the second reason better because of what happened later. How about you, Steve?"

"I'm with you. Go ahead."

"Well, at this point I get lost. You put on your gear and swam out, not with any particular destination in mind, but looking for a rock or a coral head or something of the kind where you could see fish. The shadow watched you. Suddenly he got excited, grabbed a boat, and tried to run you down."

Steve grinned at the boys. "In fact, he got so excited that he stole a boat right out from under the owner's nose. What do you think of that?"

Rick scratched his head. "We'd about decided he was either desperate or stupid. I guess he was both."

Kelly continued. "The big point is, what made him desperate? It could only have been one thing, as I see it. You were getting close to something, and he was afraid you'd find it. So he lost his head. That's borne out by the remark his pal made last night, that he'd pulled enough stupid stunts for one day."

"But what could we have been getting close to?"

"I don't know. Whatever it was, it isn't there now."

Scotty and Rick sat up straight. Scotty demanded, "How do you know?"

Steve smiled. "Because a team of Navy frogmen went over the entire area inch by inch this morning."

At the boys' surprised looks, Kelly explained, "You told the Shore Patrol enough to get us interested. We put teams in the water at daylight. There's nothing there."

"But there could have been," Scotty pointed out. "If they suspected we knew about it, they could have removed it yesterday afternoon or last night."

"Correct," Steve agreed. "They were worried, too. Otherwise why the call on you last night? And the questions?" Steve paused while the waiter served them. "The conclusion is this: Something they value was in the water near where you swam. You met me yesterday morning, and they had already identified

me. Which means that they must have agents in Washington who warned them JANIG was moving in on the case. Since it's no secret that I'm with the outfit, they could peg me easily. When you swam out toward this object, whatever it was, they were convinced that somehow JANIG had learned about it. The tail got desperate and tried to knock you off. Then, last night, they tried to find out what you knew, and how."

"Who are 'they'?" Rick asked.

"If I knew that, I'd wrap the case up and go home. Jimmy has been working on it for a week, but he hasn't any answers yet. I've been here twenty-four hours, and I know even less."

"Could you identify the two men?" Scotty queried.

"Yes. Both small fry, both local. And both are obviously green at this kind of business, otherwise you'd be a pair of real cold turkeys by now."

That was true, Rick knew. Experienced agents wouldn't have given him and Scotty the chances that they'd seized.

"The men must know what was under the water," Scotty said.

"Not necessarily. They just knew it was important, and they may have been ordered to protect it. But your former shadow was on the griddle all night, and told all he knew. It wasn't much. He didn't even know who had hired him. He wasn't stalling, either."

"What's the next step?" Rick wanted to know.

"Jimmy and I will drive you to the plane. Then

you take off for Clipper Cay. And stay there until your vacation is over. Have you a short-wave radio, by the way?"

"Yes. Why?" Rick had an all-wave battery portable.

"Monitor the Navy command frequency. Here, I'll write it down for you. Listen every night at six for five minutes. If I want you, I'll send a message. I don't think I will, but it won't do any harm to set up a schedule."

Steve lowered his voice. "Now listen to me. This thing is big. The two you ran up against yesterday were not good samples. We're dealing with some tough professionals. I don't know who they are, but from what I've seen I can tell you they're dangerous. So you two are to stay out of this case. That is an order. Stay on Clipper Cay and have fun."

"I can add a small note to that," Lieutenant Kelly said. "I'm new here. I was ordered down from Norfolk only a week ago. A first-class intelligence officer had my job. He turned up in a hospital in the British Virgins after being missing for two days. He had a fractured skull. He still doesn't know what happened to him, and neither do we."

"Okay," Steve said flatly. "I appreciate the way you handled things yesterday, but that's the end so far as you are concerned. Get out, and stay out! And that's final!"

CHAPTER VI

The Deadly Tank

THE Sky Wagon droned smoothly through a series of figure eights as Rick and Scotty inspected every inch of Clipper Cay and its surrounding waters. While Rick flew, Scotty marked off landmarks on the chart of the island that Dr. Ernst had provided.

"I wish we could spot the wreck of the *Maiden Hand,*" Scotty remarked.

"Too deep," Rick said. "We can't see bottom at twenty fathoms even in water as clear as this."

"I've got everything important marked. What say we land and look over our property?"

"Okay. I'll shoot the beach while you look for coral heads. We don't want to snag a pontoon."

The boys had already identified their house. It was set at the edge of the palms, about fifty yards inland from the beach. It looked fine. There was a small dock to which the *Water Witch* could be tied up when the scientists arrived.

Rick estimated that Tony and Zircon would arrive about sundown, two hours hence. The boys had flown over the *Water Witch* en route from St. Thomas. Apparently the scientists were enjoying the trip. Zircon had been sprawled in the cockpit while Tony trolled for fish.

"I'm a little surprised there wasn't something wrong with the plane," Rick observed. He and Scotty had gone over the Sky Wagon from propeller hub to rudder, fearful that the unknown enemy might have sabotaged the plane. But there was no sign of any tampering. However, the inspection had taken so long that it was late afternoon before they got away. It was significant and perhaps a little ominous that Steve and Jimmy Kelly had assigned a pair of husky Shore Patrol men with .45-caliber sidearms to stay with them until the plane actually took off.

"Maybe the two men who came after us were acting without orders," Scotty replied. "Maybe the real brains of the gang aren't even interested in us."

"I hope that you're right. See any coral heads?"

Although most coral growth was limited to the reef area, outcroppings of coral called "heads" had grown up toward the surface in some places. There were none in the stretch of water before the beach house where Rick planned to land.

"The water's clear. Pick your direction. There's not enough wind to make any difference."

"I'll land parallel to the beach."

Rick turned south down the center of the island.

When he had reached the right position he cut the throttle, and the nose of the Sky Wagon dropped. He banked tightly, reversing course, until the plane was headed north a hundred yards out from the beach. He let the plane feel its way toward the water, then felt the first bump as the pontoons touched. In a moment they were down, and Rick swung the plane to taxi in toward their new home.

Scotty was already stripping off his shoes and socks. As the pontoons touched bottom a few yards from shore, Scotty climbed out. Rick cut the gun while his pal pulled the plane up on the beach.

Rick got out and waited until Scotty slipped his shoes on again, then they walked to the cottage.

The door was unlocked. Few people came to Clipper Cay, and locks weren't considered necessary. The boys pushed open the front door and walked in.

There was a large living room and three bedrooms, each with twin beds. In the rear of the cottage was a kitchen with kerosene stove and kerosene refrigerator. A fifty-gallon drum out back provided the fuel supply, which was piped in through copper tubing. Rick checked the fuel. The tank was full. He read the simple instructions tacked to the wall over the refrigerator, then lighted the burner. There were frozen foods and soft drinks as well as dairy products among their supplies, packed in dry ice in the *Water Witch's* food locker; the refrigerator would be cold enough for the supplies by the time the boat arrived.

For bathing in fresh water there was an outdoor

shower, a shower head rigged to a five-gallon drum and supported on a frame of two-by-four wooden members. A canvas curtain gave privacy. Other sanitary facilities were equally primitive but effective.

Scotty opened the door of a lean-to shed on the rear of the house. "We can stow our diving gear in here. There's a bench, too. Looks as though the owner used the place for cleaning fish and stowing his fishing equipment."

They walked around to the front of the house where there was a small porch. A few wicker chairs were upended against the wall. The boys righted them and sat down.

"This is the life," Rick observed. "Look at that view."

They looked from the porch down to the sandy beach, past the pier and the Sky Wagon to water that was almost glassy calm. The water continued in a smooth stretch for about five hundred yards out to the reef. Light breakers foamed along the reef, and beyond, the water was a blue waste to the horizon. A quarter mile south, a break in the reef marked a passage where boats could enter.

Somewhere, out beyond the reef, was the wreck of the *Maiden Hand.* In his mind, Rick planned how they would go about finding it. The first step was to rig some kind of underwater towing boards. Then he and Scotty, equipped with their aqualungs, would be towed behind the *Water Witch,* scanning the bottom as they went.

He wasn't worried about finding material for the towing boards. Any kind of planks would do, or they could even make a tow board out of a fallen log, although that would be harder to control.

"Come on," he invited. "Let's walk through the palms. We need a few planks, and we might as well get them now."

By the time the scientists approached the pier, the boys had explored the central part of the island and had returned to the cottage lugging planks found in the ruin of a cottage apparently blown down by some long-past hurricane. They dropped the planks beside the house and hurried to catch the line that Zircon threw, then they warped the *Water Witch* in to the dock.

All hands turned to, and in a short time supplies were unloaded and stored, beds were made with linen and blankets loaned by Dr. Ernst, and the cottage began to take on an inhabited look.

While Tony Briotti began preparations for dinner, the boys carried their aqualung equipment to the shed at the rear of the cottage and began to check it over. Since their lives would depend on proper functioning of the equipment, they inspected the regulators carefully, checking the condition of the neoprene flaps. Once checked, the regulators were hung on nails on the shed walls, out of harm's way.

The next step was to inspect the tanks. Rick had already looked them over, but for the sake of safety the boys did it again. There were six of them, each

of seventy-cubic-feet capacity. There was an advantage to this particular capacity at the depth where they expected to dive; a diver could work only fifteen minutes at 120 feet without requiring decompression, and seventy cubic feet of air would last just long enough. Double tanks would have meant the boys would be able to stay down nearly twice as long, but would also have meant the nuisance of waiting through the decompression period of about thirteen minutes ten feet below the surface on the ascent. For this reason, the boys planned to dive with single tanks, leaving the spares on the surface.

Of course, to get even fifteen minutes of diving at twenty fathoms the tanks had to be filled to capacity. When full, they were under enormous internal pressure of over two thousand pounds per square inch. The tanks had been filled at Spindrift, but the boys decided to check them again, in case there had been some leakage through the valves during shipment.

Scotty swung one tank upright and prepared to attach the pressure gauge. Rick, inspecting another tank for bumps that might have weakened the tank wall, saw him do it.

For a moment Rick continued his inspection, then what he had seen suddenly registered. He yelled, "Scotty! The valve!"

In that instant, as Scotty attached the pressure gauge, the valve blew out!

The entire valve assembly and the pressure gauge, propelled by the tremendous pressure in the tank,

blew straight upward, ripping clear of Scotty's hand and taking a patch of skin along. The ascending assembly, traveling with bullet speed, clipped a lock of hair from his bent head.

Scotty yelled, "Run!"

The tank, its air free to escape, writhed and turned, then fell over on its side. It was like an inflated balloon, turned loose to fly around a room. Air jetted from it with terrific velocity, so that the tank was, for the period while its air lasted, a true rocket.

It struck the wall of the shed and went through it like paper, smashed into a stud and caromed slightly, so that its trajectory was altered enough to drive it directly at Rick. He fell flat and it went over, just grazing him, then flew into the palm grove. It hit a palm a slanting blow and turned upward, shooting high in the air, clipping off the top of another palm as it went.

As the boys watched, horrified, it climbed straight up. Then, its high pressure nearly exhausted, it turned leisurely and plunged back into the grove, almost burying itself in the sandy soil.

The boys sat down and stared weakly at each other. For the first time, Rick noted that Scotty's hand was bleeding. He said shakily, "Here, let me look at that."

The scientists rushed out of the house and demanded to know what had happened. The tank had blown through its devastating course so fast that they had not even had time to get outdoors.

The valve assembly, traveling with bullet speed, barely missed Scotty's head

Zircon bandaged Scotty's hand with supplies from the first-aid kit while the boys told them what had happened. Tony said, "Very careless, leaving a valve loose like that."

Rick told him positively, "It wasn't left unscrewed, Tony. We always use a wrench on those valves because high pressure is so dangerous. And it wasn't like that yesterday. I checked the tanks when we stowed them on the boat."

Scotty gestured toward the other tanks. "Better take a look."

Rick did so, and gave a low whistle. The valves had all been loosened. They were in place only by a turn or two of the threads.

"They could have come out any time," he said grimly. "Any rough handling could have knocked a valve out. And if it had happened on the boat, the tank would have gone right through the bottom or side. It was just luck Scotty and I weren't killed."

Zircon wordlessly found the valve wrench and got to work screwing the assemblies back in place. The others watched silently, until Scotty said, "Well, at least we're out of St. Thomas. There won't be any more sabotage!"

CHAPTER VII

The Derelict

Rick and Scotty were up at dawn the next morning. They didn't bother with anything so prosaic as breakfast. Instead, they collected masks, snorkels, and flippers for a preliminary dip. They didn't use the lungs; those were to be saved for more important work than casual swimming.

For this first swim, each boy selected a spear gun. Scotty chose the same light spring gun he had used to save them from the shadow, while Rick took his favorite gun, a four-strand rubber-powered weapon that packed a terrific wallop. They belted on their knives and blew up their plastic floats. These were essential for resting, if necessary, and for bringing home their catch, if any. Once a fish was speared, it was important to get it out of the water as soon as possible, since blood would bring sharks or barracuda if any were in the neighborhood.

"Come on," Rick said impatiently. "Let's go."

"I'm coming." Scotty finished coiling up the light line he used to tether the float to his belt, and they stepped into the water. The temperature was just right. They ducked under, then put on their equipment. Scotty pulled a rubber glove over his injured hand. Pushing their floats ahead of them, faces down in the water, they started for the reef.

Rick watched the bottom carefully. It was clear sand, with no sign of life other than an occasional conch or other shellfish. This was to be expected, since marine life tended to collect around reefs, rocks, pilings, wrecks, and similar things. As they approached the reef, coral heads and outcroppings began to appear. And with them, fish.

Rick hooted for Scotty's attention, then lifted his head and let his mouthpiece fall free. "Let's go outside!" he called as Scotty looked up. The other boy nodded agreement. Both were anxious to examine the reef.

The surf was light. They crossed over the reef by towing their floats and timing their movements through the breakers. Once beyond the point where the waves broke, the water was fairly calm, with only light surges from the passing waves.

Rick looked down and saw the reef drop away under him. It shelved off perhaps twenty feet down, then beyond the shelf it fell away into the depths. He looked into the blueness with a stirring of excitement. To find the *Maiden Hand,* they would have to swim into that mysterious blue realm.

Scotty hooted. Rick looked, and followed the direction of his pointing arm. There, browsing around the shelf below, was a handsome red snapper, perhaps fifteen inches long. They had stopped in Miami and Rick had noticed that red-snapper prices were about the same as those for steak. There was no doubt that the fish was very good eating. He gestured to Scotty to go after it, then floated motionless, watching.

Scotty put the loader over the tip of his spear and pushed down, cocking the gun. Then, without a splash, he slid under the water. Rick watched as his fins propelled him slowly toward the snapper. Scotty was moving slowly, because this was the prime rule in underwater hunting. As he swam, he extended the spear gun, aiming over the short barrel. The snapper stopped browsing and his dorsal fin suddenly erected, a sign of alarm. But he didn't move because he was not yet sure the big invader was an enemy. Before he could make up his mind, Scotty fired.

The spear took the fish right behind the gills. He gave a quick spurt that brought the line humming from its spool. Scotty followed quickly, caught the shaft, then sped upward to where Rick waited.

"Good shot," Rick complimented him as Scotty caught his float. Together, they took the fish off the shaft and examined him with some pride. Their first catch off Clipper Cay was a good one. The snapper was pink and firm-fleshed. He would make good eating.

Rick put his face down in the water again while Scotty secured the catch to his float. As he did so he saw a target and hooted for attention. Scotty joined him and they looked down to where a barracuda hovered motionless.

The 'cuda was perhaps two and a half feet long, not big as such predators went, but big enough. Scotty motioned to Rick to get him. Obviously the fish had been attracted by the blood or the struggles of the snapper. Rick hoped that his big brothers wouldn't join him. This one was plenty big enough. While Scotty held both floats, Rick charged his gun, pulling back the strong rubbers a pair at a time. Then he checked his safety line, filled his lungs, and went under.

The barracuda hovered, waiting. Rick knew that his apparent disinterest could change to lightning flight. Few fish were so fast. He followed Scotty's example, moving slowly toward the quarry. He was a dozen feet down now, and in the lessened light the barracuda loomed large, a slim arrow of a fish, poised for flight.

The spear gun was extended, the spear point nearing firing range. Rick planned to shoot from about six feet. He doubted that he could get closer. Flippers propelling him gently, he closed. Now he could see the pointed jaws that contained razor-edged teeth. The fish was watching him, but without apparent fear.

The barracuda head was squarely in his sights. Rick squeezed the trigger.

For a moment he thought he had missed, then the safety line ran out and the jerk almost pulled the gun from his hands. He was running out of breath, too. Quickly he planed for the surface, feeling the fury on the end of his line. He broke water, gulped air, then dove again. He pulled in the line until he saw the fish struggling. He had nearly missed. The harpoon had taken the barracuda near the tail, fortunately hitting the spine. Rick pulled him in, hand over hand, then gripped his spear by the extreme end. He had no desire to close with those slashing, dangerous jaws. Holding fast to the spear he shot to the surface again. Scotty was waiting, knife in hand. As Rick extended the spear toward him the keen knife flashed across the 'cuda's spine just behind the gills. Rick tossed his gun onto the float, then together they heaved the fish up beside it.

"Spindrift was never like this," Scotty said, grinning.

Rick gulped air and grinned back.

A hail from the shore reached them. They turned and saw Tony Briotti. He was waving a frying pan in a signal for breakfast. Suddenly Rick realized that he was famished.

"Let's go," he said. "We'll trade these for bacon and eggs."

It was nearly noon before they got into the water

again. The first part of the morning was spent in fashioning sea sleds from the planks the boys had gathered. This was simple enough, but it took a little time. First the planks were cut to proper length, then two of them were nailed together. A bridle was arranged so that they could be towed, and spare weight belts and weights were used to counteract their bouyancy. They were very much like the aqua-planes commonly towed behind motorboats, but much cruder, and designed to go under rather than remain on the surface.

Two long ropes were arranged so that a sled could be towed on either side of the *Water Witch.* Once this was done, the boys rechecked their equipment, attached the regulators to the tanks, and carried them to the beach.

Zircon would pilot the boat, following the 120-foot mark on the chart. Tony would act as tender at the stern, while Rick and Scotty would ride the sleds. The first leg would take them through the reef channel, then south to the tip of the island, reverse course and north again, staying at the twenty-fathom mark. Zircon was sure that he would be able to follow the prescribed course by judging his distance from the reef.

When all was in readiness, they loaded their gear aboard the *Water Witch,* including the spare tanks. Only the runaway tank was missing, and Rick had determined that its wild flight had not weakened it. The valve and pressure gauge had been recovered

after a considerable search, and the tank could be refilled with the others.

Zircon took the *Water Witch* through the reef, and the boys donned their equipment while Tony swung the ladder outboard. Rick checked his own straps, and then those of Scotty, while Scotty returned the favor. Then each checked the flow of air through his mouthpiece, and made sure the reserve rod was in the "up" position. This done, they entered the water. Tony tossed the boards over and made sure the lines were secured.

Rick and Scotty paddled the boards to the extreme length of the lines, then separated as much as the lines allowed. They were about thirty feet apart and a hundred feet behind the boat.

They waved their readiness to Tony, who relayed the go-ahead to Zircon. The boat started slowly.

Rick moved forward on his board, and the weighted board tilted down. It acted as a hydrofoil, its forward motion pulling it deeper into the water. Rick waited until he was only ten feet from the bottom, then shifted his weight back again. Obediently the board tilted upward and raced for the surface. Rick moved forward again just in time to keep from breaking through the surface. By adjusting his weight, he could keep the board level, or go up or down. It wasn't easy and he had to fight the board level almost constantly.

Bubbles rose from the regulator between his shoulder blades as he breathed rhythmically. The lung

performed effortlessly, giving him as much air as he needed. He felt the pressure on his ears as he steered the board toward bottom, and there was an instant of pain before his ears adjusted.

The bottom was sandy. To his right he saw the wall of the reef, and once a startled snook shot out of his way. To his left he could see Scotty. Before he knew it the boat had throttled down, a signal that they were at the southern end of the reef. He tilted upward and surfaced.

Tony called, "How is it?"

"Great!" Rick called back. "But we'll need lots more line. It was shallow on the way down, but if we try to go any deeper the angle of the line will make the boards come up."

"You should try it," Scotty said. "Honestly, Tony, it's wonderful!"

"I'll try it a little later," Tony promised. "I'm giving you all the line we have, about three hundred feet each. If you can't make it, surface. We'll have to splice the two lines together and use just one board."

Zircon came to the stern and bellowed, "You forgot these!"

He tossed in two fishing floats and coils of line. Those were in case they found the wreck. Whoever spotted it was to drop off his board, secure the line to the wreck, and let the float rise to the surface. In that way, they would have a guide.

Each boy took one of the units and fastened it to his weight belt.

"We're off!" Zircon called. "Ready?"

The boys yelled that they were. Rick fitted his mouthpiece and checked the seal of his mask. Scotty did the same, then both tilted their boards and slid under.

On the northbound leg they had trouble keeping the boards down because of the tendency of the lead rope to pull the front of the boards up, but by crawling far forward, they managed.

They were deeper than they had ever gone before, but Rick felt no sensation of fright or strangeness. It was a green world, not dark but yet not bright. The light was subdued, filtered by the fathoms of water. The bottom was mostly clear sand, dotted now and then by patches of growth. There did not seem to be many fish, or perhaps their eyes were not adjusted to the subdued light. Scotty was close to the reef on the northbound leg, while Rick was about twenty feet farther out.

For long moments there was only the sensation of rushing through the water, the distant throb of the engines, and the sound of their own bubbles. Then, ahead, Rick saw a mass of growth and tilted his board upward just in time to clear it.

Scotty hooted once, then again. Rick turned in time to see his pal's board leap ahead, free of Scotty's weight. Sudden fear gripped him. Had Scotty been caught? Instantly he released his own board and saw it scoot for the surface. He reversed his course and swam rapidly back.

The obstruction he had cleared was dead ahead. And there were fish! So many that they seemed like a swarm of flies around it. The biggest was not more than five inches long. Then he saw Scotty. His friend was fastening the float line to a projection!

Rick's heart leaped. What he thought was a rock formation on the sea floor was the wreck of a ship! Scotty had recognized it and dropped off. The *Maiden Hand?* He hooted and Scotty looked up. The other boy shook his head.

It wasn't the *Maiden Hand,* then. But how did Scotty know? In a moment, when he joined the other boy, he saw the curling edges of steel plate. This was a steel ship, then, and not a very large one at that. He estimated its length as not more than a hundred feet. Still, it was a wreck—their first. There, at twenty fathoms, he and Scotty shook hands solemnly while the tiny fish swam around them like curious gnats.

Scotty finished tying his line and unwound it from the wooden spool. The float rose upward and vanished far overhead. They heard the throb of the returning boat, and Rick hooted twice, the signal to surface. Scotty nodded, and they went up, slowly, careful to breathe naturally and not to overtake their small bubbles, as doctrine dictated. In a moment Rick saw the hull of the boat, propellers barely turning, and knew that Zircon was holding position overhead.

They broke water off the side of the *Water Witch,*

and Rick waited until Scotty hailed the scientists. "We found a wreck, but it's a steel ship."

"Come aboard!" Tony called, and helped them up the ladder when they complied. The tanks were cumbersome when out of the water.

"It's a fish paradise!" Rick said excitedly. "I'm going to get my camera working and take some pictures. You've got to go down and look, both of you."

"How did you spot it?" Zircon asked.

"Scotty did. I thought it was a rock formation and went over it, but Scotty dropped off."

"I saw curled plate," Scotty answered. "I knew it wasn't the *Maiden Hand,* with steel sides, but I didn't think we'd want to pass up a wreck."

"You were so right," Rick agreed, grinning.

A check of their tanks with the gauge showed that only about five minutes diving time remained at the twenty-fathom depth, so the regulators were transferred to spare tanks. Tony and Zircon, already in trunks, donned diving gear and followed Scotty's line to the bottom. The boys waited impatiently, Scotty taking the helm to hold the boat in place.

Ten minutes later the scientists surfaced, and Rick helped them aboard. Tony removed his mask and grinned. "It's as wonderful as you said it was."

"What kind of ship was it?" Rick asked.

Tony had been a destroyer skipper during the war and he knew ships.

"Probably an interisland cargo carrier of some kind. At any rate, it appears to be a small cargo ship.

It's so overgrown with marine growth that the shape is cluttered. It might have been a small tanker."

"We can explore it from stem to stern," Rick suggested excitedly.

Scotty joined them and commented, "But not right now. We'll have to go ashore and charge the tanks. There may be time for one more dive this afternoon if we hurry."

"Besides," Hobart Zircon said with a smile, "I'm hungry. As you say, Rick, diving certainly develops the appetite!"

They docked, and Tony and Zircon went off to see about preparing sandwiches. The boys decided that rather than carry the tanks back and forth from the pier to the shed, it would be more sensible to bring their small, portable gas-driven compressor to the pier.

Scotty went after it while Rick tied the tanks to the afterrail of the *Water Witch,* in position for filling.

A yell from Scotty stopped him. He looked up and saw his friend beckon, and ran down the pier to the house. The scientists joined him and Scotty at the shed where the compressor had been stored.

"We've been sabotaged again," Scotty told them flatly. "There's oil in the compressor!"

"Are you certain?" Zircon pressed close to examine the machine.

"Yes. I stumbled over my own feet and tipped the compressor on its side. And oil ran out through the

air fitting. Look!" Scotty held up his hand, and it was smeared with glistening oil.

A cold shiver traced its way down Rick's spine. Oil in a compressor was blown into fine particles, too small to be seen. If they got into an air tank they would be breathed in, leaving a thin coating on a diver's lungs. The result was a condition almost exactly like pneumonia, called "lipoid pneumonia." Their special filter, designed by Zircon, probably would have taken all the oil particles out of the air before it got into the tanks, but that didn't alter the fact that faced them. Someone had deliberately put oil in the compressor. Someone just didn't want them around!

CHAPTER VIII

The Fancy Frogmen

"THE question is," Rick stated, "when was the oil put in? While we were at Charlotte Amalie? Or while we were out hunting the wreck just now?"

"In Charlotte Amalie, of course," Tony said. "Why do you think it might have been done just a little while ago?"

Rick shrugged. He had no answer to that. The question had popped into his mind unbidden.

"We didn't take the compressor apart," Scotty reminded him.

That was true. But Rick had started it in Charlotte Amalie to be sure it was functioning. There was no oil in it then. He said as much.

"You started the compressor at the same time you checked the tanks," Zircon reminded him. "I believe the oil was put in at the same time the valves were loosened."

That seemed reasonable. Rick put aside his hunch.

"Well, we found it in time, anyway. Now Scotty and I will have to tear the compressor down and clean it before we can recharge the tanks."

"After lunch," Tony said. "Don't you remember? A diver is supposed to rest after each dive. Relax, and I'll have some sandwiches ready in a few minutes."

All hands were hungry. Scotty stowed away four sandwiches and Rick did nearly as well. Then they started work on the compressor. It wasn't a hard job, but it was tedious, and nearly two hours elapsed before they finished. Each part had to be washed in soap and water, then carefully dried. Finally, the compressor was ready. They carried it to the boat, started the gas engine, and connected the tanks. But before the air started to flow, Rick carefully inspected the filter system to be sure that hadn't been tampered with too.

"You know," he observed, "these enemies Steve is hunting know a lot about sport diving."

Scotty considered. "They knew that tanks could be dangerous, and they knew that oil in a compressor is dangerous. You're right, Rick. They know plenty about it."

"But it doesn't do us much good to know that they know," Rick concluded. "Well, now what? It will be a few hours before all the tanks are charged."

"Where are Zircon and Tony?"

"Napping. We probably should join them."

"Not me. There's nothing to do after sundown but

sleep. I'd like to take a walk and look the island over."

Rick sighed. "Always an eager beaver. I'll go with you, if you don't walk fast."

They turned north and walked up the beach. Somewhere off this stretch of beach was the *Maiden Hand.* But where? They strolled along leisurely, stopping now and then to examine some bit of beach flotsam. There were shells, but most of them were small and water worn.

"We'll have to collect a few shells on the reef," Rick said. "Barby will be disappointed if we don't."

"That's easy enough to do," Scotty replied. "I saw half a dozen different varieties this morning."

They passed a beach house, obviously empty. Rick gestured toward it. "Funny how few people there are here. If I owned a place on this island I'd be here all the time."

"Unless you had to make a living," Scotty added practically. "This isn't the season for vacations. I expect vacation time finds plenty of activity here. There's one cabin occupied to the south of us. I saw people there this morning. They're probably the same ones who waved at us from a boat when we flew over day before yesterday."

"The boat isn't there now," Rick observed. "At least, I haven't seen it."

"They may have gone to St. Thomas for supplies. Or they may have gone home." Scotty pointed to what seemed to be the largest house on the island,

near the northern tip. "That's quite a place. Let's go have a look."

There was a long pier in front of the house, and, unlike the others on the island, this house had a second story. There was no sign of life. They walked around it and found a barbecue pit. Scotty examined it. "This has been used recently, probably in the past few days."

Rick bent down and peered at a scrap of meat. "You're right. They had steak. And this piece hasn't dried out yet."

"Maybe they're still here." Scotty walked to the back of the house. "They might be out fishing or something." He looked in a window and called urgently, "Rick! Look!"

Rick hurried to his side and peered in. The room was evidently used for storing diving equipment. Hung along one wall were three full diving suits of expensive make. Next to them, neatly racked, was an assortment of spear guns, all of the spring type, and all of Italian make.

On another wall were three Scuba regulators, not aqualung types such as the boys used, but the variety that carries a full face mask through which the diver breathes. In a rack on the floor were nine spare tanks and a compressor much larger and more expensive than theirs.

Swim fins, also of Italian make, were lying on a table. They were the shoe type, put on like a pair of slippers. Rick identified an underwater camera, com-

plete with steering fins and outside controls, and a number of face masks with built-in snorkels. Boxes stacked on the floor carried labels that identified them as midseason suits of French make.

"We've found some real fancy frogmen," Scotty observed. "This place looks like a high-priced showroom for diving gear."

"Pretty plush," Rick agreed.

They wandered back down to the beach and found that this area of the island was apparently more open to the sea. There were bits of flotsam, including coconuts that had washed in. The sea shells were larger, and they found a few worth picking up.

Scotty beckoned and pointed to a piece of wood, nearly buried in the sand. "What do you make of this?"

Rick examined it. It was curved, and a shred of green metal still clung to the rusty remains of an ancient hand-fashioned nail. He looked up with sudden excitement. "It's a section of a ship rib. And a pretty old one, too." His finger indicated the shred of metal. "Copper. Or used to be." He broke it off. "Completely oxidized. It's been in the water a long time, perhaps even centuries."

The boys stared out at the reef, both half afraid to put their thoughts into words. Finally Scotty asked, "Do you remember reading about any earthquakes or big tidal waves down here recently?"

Rick tried to recall. "No. Why?"

"Well, the *Maiden Hand* has been under the water

out here for a couple of centuries—and in pretty deep water, too. It would take some disturbance that could reach down a hundred and twenty feet to break off a chunk."

Rick grinned. "You're right. But we haven't anything to lose by taking a look, have we?"

They trotted down the beach toward their own house at a half run. Rick looked at his watch. "At least one pair of tanks should be full by now, and there's plenty of time for a dive. Come on!"

They paused at the pier, put the pressure gauge on the first two tanks in series, and found them charged, as Rick had predicted. Then they ran for the house.

Zircon and Tony were gone and there was a note on the living-room table. *"We're exploring the southern end. Be back in an hour or two."*

"Shall we wait?" Scotty asked.

"No need. We can take our floats. Let's get going."

They changed to trunks. Then, since they would not have anyone on the surface to keep track of time or depth, strapped on wrist watches, compasses, and wrist depth gauges. Floats and weight belts were put on, then the boys added small plastic slates and pencils for writing underwater. Knives, masks, snorkels, their favorite guns, fins, and lungs completed their equipment.

"Shall we walk up the beach, or swim?"

"Swim," Rick said promptly. "This stuff is too heavy to carry comfortably."

They launched floats, placed aqualung mouthpieces on top of their masks, and swam parallel to the beach. By using snorkels they avoided the effort of lifting their faces out of water to breathe and conserved the air in the tanks. With effective but effortless leg strokes they moved along rapidly.

As they approached the ship rib that Scotty had found they turned and swam straight out toward the reef, crossed it, then came to a halt.

"Let's tie our floats to something," Rick suggested, and Scotty nodded.

Aqualung mouthpieces replaced the snorkels, and each boy tested his flow of air, checked to be sure his mask was connected to the lung by a safety line, charged his gun, and set his watch. The watches, designed especially for underwater swimming, had an outer dial that could be set to show elapsed diving time.

Rick hooted and pointed down. Scotty nodded and they submerged. Because of their belt weights, and the weight of air in their tanks, they were just heavy enough to sink slowly. After the dive, when the air in the tanks was nearly exhausted, they would weigh about five pounds less and have a slight positive buoyancy that would help them to rise.

They found coral outcroppings and tied their float lines, being careful not to cut their hands. Rick suddenly wished they had brought canvas gloves. Scotty still wore a single rubber one.

Then, with a few strong kicks to overcome their

inertia, they started down the face of the reef. It fell off sharply for about forty feet, then more gradually until sand bottom was reached at about ninety feet.

Rick felt the sensation of thrusting his face into a wedge as the pressure increased. He swallowed a couple of times and felt his ears equalize, but his mask was beginning to hurt. He exhaled through his nose and equalized the pressure inside the mask.

There were plenty of fish around now. A grouper saw them coming and ducked into his hole in the coral. A fairly large moray eel, only his head visible, watched their progress. Tiny demoiselles fluttered around them, and a pair of red squirrelfish watched from the shelter of a purple coral fan.

The coral growth was spectacular, with fantastic shapes and colors. Then, as they went deeper, the colors gradually faded to a uniform green. Rick knew from underwater flash photographs that the appearance was deceptive. The colors remained, but the quality of light changed.

Scotty hooted four times, the signal for danger! Rick looked and saw a barracuda hovering near by. He gulped. The fish was easily five feet long. Both boys lifted their spear guns just in case the 'cuda attacked, but the motion alarmed him and he was gone with one powerful flick of his tail.

Rick consulted his wrist depth gauge, holding it close to his face plate. They were at bottom at ninety feet, and the clean sand dropped away at an angle

of about thirty degrees. The boys planed downward, a few feet above the sand until Rick's gauge read 120 feet. This was the limit of their dive. Going deeper would mean stopping for decompression on the way up.

He recalled that the waves came into the beach from a slightly northerly direction and motioned to Scotty that they should turn north. Scotty moved out to the limit of visibility, and they swam on a compass heading of north, watching for any sign of a wreck. Now and then a coral shelf extended out from the reef, but they saw nothing that could have been a wreck. Once they swam over a patch of marine growth perhaps twenty feet long and ten wide, and a huge eagle ray lifted from it and glided off like a weird futuristic airplane.

It was quiet, except for the regular chuckle of their exhausts, and the light was subdued and even. It was a world without shadows. Still, Rick thought, there was plenty of light for photography. Next time he would bring his camera.

The watch showed him that over half their allotted time was gone, and he hooted once to Scotty, then reversed course, heading back toward their floats.

They approached the patch where they had seen the ray and Rick paused suddenly. There was an odd shape on the sand near the patch. He flippered over to it and examined it. Scotty joined him. It looked

like an oversized mushroom protruding from the sand at an angle.

Rick unsheathed his knife and poked at it. The sharp tip penetrated for a fraction of an inch, then stopped. It was either rock or metal, and judging from the shape, it was unlikely that it was rock. He put his knife under it and pried, and the thing moved in the sand.

Both boys went to work on it, scooping the sand from around it. In a moment they had it clear. It was something like a dumbbell, covered with marine growth where it had been above the sand, but fairly smooth under it.

Rick took his belt slate and scribbled, "Metal."

Scotty nodded. Then both of them turned to look at the patch of marine life.

A distant throb, as though of a boat, caught their attention. They looked up, but the surface was invisible.

It was Tony and Zircon, Rick decided. They probably had returned to the cottage and found the diving equipment missing. They could spot the location where the boys were diving easily enough, first by the floats, then by the bubbles of their exhausts.

Scotty hooted suddenly, four times. Rick turned quickly in time to see a six-foot shark speed past. The tips of the pectoral fins and the second dorsal were darker than the rest of the fish, and Rick identified it as a black-tipped shark. Obviously, the shark

was on business of its own, not particularly interested in them. Still, it was curious. The shark was rushing almost straight up.

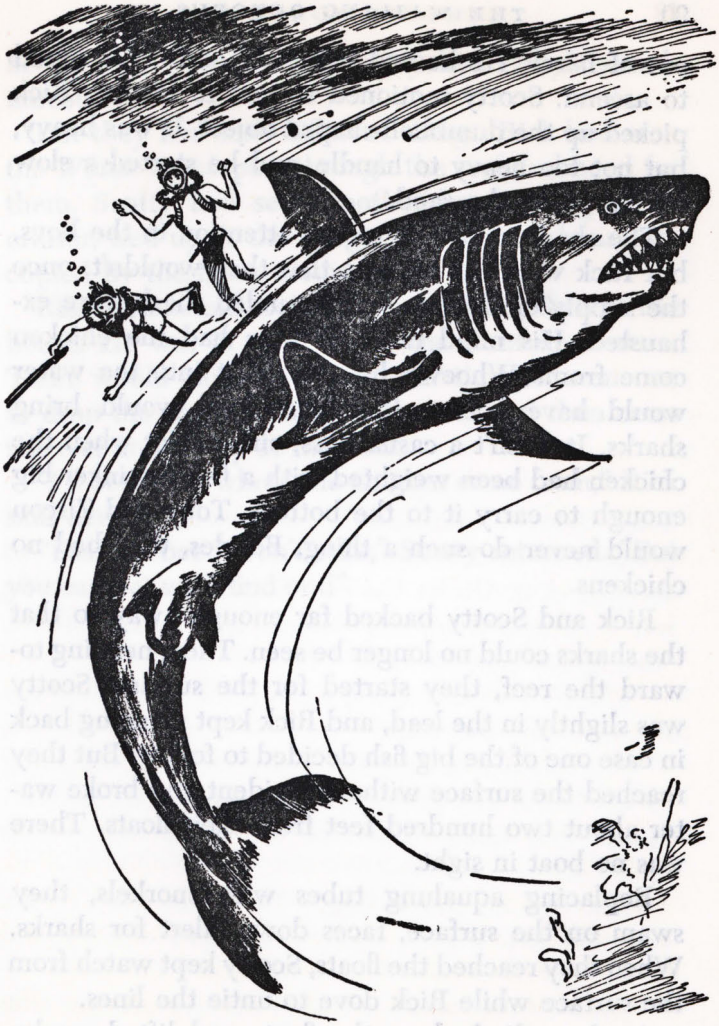
Scotty gripped his arm and pointed. More sharks! Another black tip. And a ten-foot leopard shark! All rushing upward.

The boys watched tensely, and then out of the dimness above something sped down at them, followed by the sharks. It landed in the clear sand just beyond the marine growth. Rick saw a black tip go for it, then the black tip was struck from the side by the big leopard. In spite of his sudden apprehension, Rick couldn't help wishing for his camera.

The sharks rushed again, and the falling object was lifted from the sand by the disturbed water. This time, Rick recognized it. A chicken! It was tied to a length of string from which dangled a lead sinker. The bird was dead, but apparently freshly so. He knew that it was the chicken blood that had brought the sharks—and a giant barracuda! The great fish, a full six feet in length, slashed past the sharks and tore a chunk out of the bird.

The leopard shark made a fast pass at the barracuda, then turned and snapped at a black tip. Rick gulped. A hole suddenly appeared in the black's side, as smooth as though scooped out of ice cream. And then the other sharks hit the wounded black tip.

There were many sharks now, worrying the chicken and the wounded black tip like fierce dogs over scraps of meat. Rick thought, "We'd better get



Rick turned in time to see a six-foot shark speed past

out of here!" He hooted twice at Scotty, the signal to ascend. Scotty motioned to him to retreat. Rick picked up the dumbbell-shaped object. It was heavy, but not too heavy to handle, and he started a slow retreat along the sand.

The sharks were paying no attention to the boys, but Rick wasn't at all sure that they wouldn't, once the supply of chicken and wounded shark were exhausted. His mind raced. Where had the chicken come from? Whoever had tossed it into the water would have known that the blood would bring sharks. It wasn't a casual toss, either. Not when the chicken had been weighted with a fishing sinker big enough to carry it to the bottom. Tony and Zircon would never do such a thing. Besides, they had no chickens.

Rick and Scotty backed far enough away so that the sharks could no longer be seen. Then, heading toward the reef, they started for the surface. Scotty was slightly in the lead, and Rick kept glancing back in case one of the big fish decided to follow. But they reached the surface without incident and broke water about two hundred feet from their floats. There was no boat in sight.

Replacing aqualung tubes with snorkels, they swam on the surface, faces down, alert for sharks. When they reached the floats, Scotty kept watch from the surface while Rick dove to untie the lines.

As they climbed on the floats and lifted masks,

Scotty and Rick pointed and yelled "Hey!" simultaneously.

But they had seen different things. Rick had seen the *Water Witch* pass through the reef and head for them. Scotty had seen another boat, a big cabin cruiser, tied up at the pier in front of the house occupied by the fancy frogmen!

Rick turned and looked at the cruiser, then at the house. He was in time to see the front door close. There would have been plenty of time for someone to drop the chicken from the cruiser and then cross the reef and tie up at the dock.

"I'll bet that's where the chicken came from," Rick said harshly.

"That's a bet I won't take," Scotty returned. "But you can bet we'll find out!"

CHAPTER IX

Wreck of the "Maiden Hand"

TONY BRIOTTI examined the metallic object they had brought from the bottom, then took his knife and scraped at it. Under the covering of marine growth, red rust appeared. He looked at Hobart Zircon. "Recognize this, Hobart?"

"There's only one thing I can think of that fits the shape, Tony. Bar shot."

"My conclusion exactly." Tony weighed the thing in his hand. He grinned at the boys. "Adventure-prone, and lucky. Describe the place where you found it."

Rick did so, concluding, "The patch didn't look anything like a ship, though. If that's what you're thinking."

"After two centuries, the ship would no longer look like a ship. But this is unquestionably a bar shot for an ancient cannon. It was used to cut ship's rigging,

and to knock down masts, and create other damage of that sort. It's likely that the pirates, or the *Maiden Hand,* would have carried bar shot."

"I think you have found the ship," Zircon told them, "and the question about earthquakes was a good one. There was a heavy quake in this region about a year ago. I had occasion to recall it a half hour ago when we found a slight fault at the southern tip of the island that had uncovered an Indian midden."

"And a fine one," Tony added. "You boys can dive for treasure if you want to. I've some work of my own to do."

"Incidentally," Scotty reminded Rick, "in the confusion below we forgot to send up a buoy. Hope we can find the place again."

"We can."

"What confusion?" Zircon asked.

Rick told him. "A freshly killed chicken was dropped near us. And it must have been bleeding when it hit the water, because we suddenly had a shark convention around us." He pointed to the boat tied at the pier, now far behind them because the *Water Witch* had been moving. "And we think that was the boat that dropped it."

"It was weighted," Scotty added.

The scientists looked at each other. Tony grunted. "It makes no sense, Hobart. Why would anyone weight a freshly killed chicken and throw it over the side?"

"No reason at all," the big scientist said, "unless he wanted to create mischief below."

"But just the act of dropping a chicken wouldn't ensure harm to divers below," Tony objected.

"That's why I said mischief. Inexperienced divers might panic under such circumstances and attract the sharks to themselves."

Rick hazarded a guess. "What if they just wanted to keep people from diving in the area?"

"That might be one way of doing it." Zircon said thoughtfully. "Are you suggesting that there are others after the *Maiden Hand* treasure?"

Scotty spoke up. "How could anyone else find out about the treasure?"

"It's possible that there are other references besides the logbook we found," Tony replied. "But it would be too farfetched to speculate that other treasure hunters had found the location and were diving right at this time."

"This might be related to what happened on St. Thomas," Rick ventured.

Zircon shook his massive head. "Extremely unlikely. Consider." He ticked off the points on his fingers. "Who knew we were coming to Clipper Cay? Ernst, Steve, and his Navy friend. We did not mention it to the people from whom we bought supplies, nor did we discuss it in the presence of others. We were not followed here. No, Rick, I think that we cannot blame this incident on the ones in St. Thomas."

"Then it was a dangerous practical joke," Tony concluded. "Unless there was some legitimate reason for throwing the chicken over that we don't know about."

Zircon steered the *Water Witch* through the reef entrance, and the Spindrifters tied up at the dock. Rick and Scotty inspected the compressor and then measured the amount of air in the tanks. They hooked the tanks up, refilled the gas tank of the compressor engine, and left the tanks to fill while they went to the cottage.

Rick and Zircon prepared dinner while Tony and Scotty refilled the gasoline lanterns that provided light, and generally straightened up the cottage.

Rick called, "Tony, tell us more about this Indian stuff you found."

Scotty added, "And what's a midden, anyway?"

Tony leaned on his broom. "A midden is a polite name for a refuse heap. Before the days of rubbish collection, people used to dump their trash in the yard. The Indians did, and thereby provided archaeologists with an important source of information. Apparently a tribe lived on this island, close to the southern tip. It's likely that they simply dumped their rubbish into the water. Well, the earthquake Hobart spoke of shifted the old coral formations at the southern tip slightly and lifted a few square yards out of the water."

He went to the front porch and brought back a curved piece of material, encrusted with coral. "This

used to be a pottery bowl, probably Taino in origin. I'll probably find many like it."

It didn't look like much of a find to Rick, but he knew that Tony's trained eyes could see many things that he couldn't. "You'll dive with us, though, won't you?" he asked.

"Of course. But you and Scotty are the real enthusiasts, and the diving I do will use up air that you properly should be using. I'll go down with you in the morning, because I want a look at the wreck. But after that I think Hobart and I can amuse ourselves on the midden while you and Scotty hunt treasure. Of course we'll be ready to help if you need us."

A few minutes before six, Rick turned on his portable all-wave radio to the channel Steve had given him, but the air was silent. He waited for ten minutes, then snapped it off again. Apparently Steve had no message for them.

Dinner consisted of fresh snapper and barracuda steaks served with coconut sauce for which Zircon had learned the recipe during his tours of the Pacific. It was delicious, and Rick wondered about the fussiness of people who refuse to eat barracuda simply because the fish is a noted predator. However, he knew that people are served barracuda every day under less offensive names.

After dinner they sat over coffee on the porch and watched the sun sink beyond the reef. It was like a Pacific sunset—colorful and somehow soothing.

The boys walked to the pier, checked their tanks, and found them fully charged. Then, at Scotty's suggestion, they locked tanks and compressor in the cabin of the *Water Witch.* Fresh-water rinses for the remainder of their equipment followed, and they carried the equipment into the house.

Zircon was already engrossed in a book, while Tony was engaged in scraping the pottery shard he had found. The boys watched him for a few minutes, then Scotty suggested, "How about a walk?"

"Okay." There was an idea stirring in the back of Rick's head. As they walked down to the beach he said, "We ought to take a look at the folks who own that boat."

And Scotty said in the same breath, "Let's visit the fancy frogmen."

They grinned at each other, amused at how much alike their thought processes were.

"We'd better approach from the back," Scotty suggested.

Rick agreed. "Suppose we cross to the eastern shore, then walk up until we're in sight of the house. It's close to the northern tip, anyway."

It was almost fully dark now, and no lights appeared in the houses south of them. As they watched, lights showed far up the beach where the fancy frogmen lived. But there were no other lights anywhere on the island.

"Just two houses occupied," Rick said.

"We'll probably have more neighbors during the

week end," Scotty answered. "The people in the house south of us must have left, but they may be back. Come on."

They made their way through the palm grove, watching fruit bats whirl against the darkening sky. There was a slight breeze, just enough to make the palms whisper. It reminded Rick of Hawaii.

The eastern shore was rough. The reef was much closer here, and long swells that had come all the way across the Atlantic sounded like subdued thunder as they broke. It was dark now, and only the white of the breaking water could be seen.

They walked up the eastern shore until the lights of the frogmen's house were directly opposite, then turned toward it, moving with caution.

"Take it easy," Rick whispered. "They may be outside."

As they drew closer they could see that the lights were in the front rooms of the house. The back was dark, except for light that came through open inner doors.

"Wait." Scotty whispered. "I'll see if they're out front."

Rick sat down to wait as Scotty vanished. Few could equal his pal when it came to moving silently and invisibly.

In a surprisingly short time Scotty reappeared. "No one out front," he reported. "They're all in the living room."

Rick rose, and together they walked swiftly and silently to the rear of the house. The door of the room in which the diving gear was stowed opened into the living room. Perhaps they could see in there.

A card game was in progress by the light of a kerosene lamp. Rick studied the face of a heavy-set, dark-haired man who sat facing him. The man wore a T shirt that displayed the heavy muscles of arms and chest. His face was square-jawed and powerful, the eyes set deep under bushy eyebrows. His hair was short and curly, sprinkled with gray. He looked like one used to command. Rick's quick imagination pictured him on the quarterdeck of a slaver, ruling his cutthroat crew with iron fists.

The others were not visible through the door. The boys moved silently to the side of the house and drew back so they could look through the living-room window. The second man was visible now. He was young, perhaps in his twenties, and he had an unruly shock of blond hair. Once he might have been good-looking, but a scar crossed a nose that had been badly broken.

The third man sat with his back to them. Rick touched Scotty's sleeve and they went around the house via the back. The view was blocked by an open door.

Scotty put his lips close to Rick's ear. "The front."

Rick led the way, moving carefully because light spilled out of the front windows and the open front

door. They reached a vantage point and looked in. The third man was clearly visible. The boys reached for each other at the same moment.

The third man was Steve's shadow!

Morning found the *Water Witch* anchored on the reef close to the place where the boys had found the bar shot. There was no sign of activity at the fancy frogmen's house, and the boat was tied up as it had been the previous evening. Apparently they were late sleepers.

The Spindrifters tossed coins to see who would make the first dive, and the lot fell to Rick and Tony. They donned their equipment, then Rick picked up a spear gun while Tony selected a wrecking bar from his equipment.

It took ten minutes of their precious fifteen to find the wreck again. This time, Rick took the precaution of tying a float to a projection and unwinding line while the float rose to the surface.

Tony started at one end of the mass of marine growth and inserted his wrecking bar. Rick joined him in heaving, and a cloud of dust and fish eggs rose to envelop them. It took a moment or two for the water to clear enough so they could see, then Tony hooted his triumph. The pull had exposed rotted timbers. This had to be a ship! But was it the *Maiden Hand*?

Rick wondered if they would ever be sure. Yet, he felt that it was, even though he realized that the

feeling grew as much out of optimism and hope as anything else. Still, it was unlikely that another ship would be wrecked at this same depth.

Tony wrote on his slate, "Mor undr sand thn can see, likely."

Rick nodded. The shifting sands had undoubtedly covered, exposed, and re-covered the wreck dozens of times in the years it had lain here. He looked at his watch, then reluctantly gave Tony the signal to surface. Their time was up.

On the *Water Witch,* Tony said, "It's a ship all right. And since its on the western reef at twenty fathoms, I'd say that it's very likely the one we want."

"Wonder how Captain Campion pegged the depth so accurately?" Scotty inquired.

Zircon had a possible answer. "Let's assume the pirates knew he was carrying the golden statue. It would have been logical for them to sound, just to see if there was any possibility of recovering the treasure from the wreck. Since they kept Campion for ransom, he would have heard the depth mentioned."

It seemed reasonable, and it was as good an answer as any, since there was no hope of knowing whether it was right or wrong.

"How do we find the statue?" Rick asked.

Tony handed him the wrecking bar with a grin. "Take the wreck apart a piece at a time. And if you still haven't found it, start digging."

The boys sighed. Rick recalled reading somewhere

that treasure hunting was synonymous with ditch digging. Now he knew what the author meant.

Scotty and Zircon prepared to dive, shifting the regulators to fresh tanks. While they checked equipment, Rick rummaged through the boat's locker and found a length of heavy line. An empty water jug with a screw cap was attached to it, and he handed the end of the line to Scotty to take down with him.

"The fishing float and line isn't heavy enough. Let's add this, just in case."

Scotty took it and went over the side. He carried his spear gun while Zircon took the wrecking bar. Rick watched as they vanished from sight, leaving only the continuing track of bubbles.

Ashore, a man came out of the fancy frogmen's house and walked down to the beach. He shaded his eyes and stared at the *Water Witch.* Rick pointed him out to Tony.

"This business stumps me," the archaeologist admitted. "Are you certain about the identity of the man who was trailing Ames?"

"We're dead sure."

"Then is there any possible way he could have known about our presence on the island?"

"Not unless he recognized the *Water Witch.*"

"That must be it. The question is, what do we do about it?"

"Nothing, I guess. Except to be on our guard."

Twin sets of bubbles rose, some distance from the boat, showing that both lungs were working well

twenty fathoms down. Since the bubbles did not ascend vertically, they did not show the location of the two on the bottom. Rick studied them, working on an idea.

The chicken had dropped pretty close to them. But since their floats were tied to the reef, and their bubbles were carried off a vertical path by the light currents, neither could have been used to pinpoint their whereabouts—*unless whoever dropped the chicken had an excellent knowledge of the currents in this particular place!*

He carried the thought further. The shadow had gotten upset because he and Scotty had gone swimming in an area where something was hidden. At least, that was a reasonable assumption, based on the events at St. Thomas. The fancy diving gear in the house, the attempt to warn them off, and the presence of Steve's erstwhile shadow on Clipper Cay could then be added up.

Right here, in this particular area, another mysterious something was hidden! Something that the fancy frogmen dived often to see, use, collect, or whatever they did with it. That would account for their familiarity with the currents!

He started to tell Tony, then reconsidered. It was a pretty good hypothesis, he thought, but not supported by ironclad evidence. If he told the scientists, they might forbid any more diving in the area. And he was determined to get that treasure—more for his sister Barby than for himself. If he failed to get it

there would be no living with Barby, since she would always maintain *she* could have found it if they had only allowed her to go on their old expedition.

Zircon and Scotty broke water and Rick helped them aboard.

"It's a ship, and a sailing ship at that," Zircon boomed. "We identified what was almost certainly a compass binnacle, probably brass, but there wasn't time to get it free and bring it up. Scotty found what is probably the muzzle of a cannon, buried in the sand."

"There's so much growth over everything that it's hard to tell what's what," Scotty added. "But it certainly looked like a cannon muzzle."

"From what we saw, I suspect that the portion above the sand is the stern, probably the stern superstructure. If the timbers haven't completely rotted away, ripping off the top should expose the stern cabins."

"That seems reasonable," Tony agreed. "At any rate, it's a good basis for operation. Rick, if you'll look in my kit, you will find a larger bar you can borrow. You'll both need tools if you're going to take the ship apart."

"Anyway, that's enough diving for the morning," Zircon said. "Let's up anchor and go."

While the others got the boat underway, Rick started the compressor in the cockpit and connected up the tanks they had used. He almost wished he and

Scotty had been extravagant and had ordered triple tank blocks to give them maximum time under water. Still, the singles were convenient, and diving was a sport it wasn't wise to overdo. By the time they were through with lunch and had rested awhile, the tanks would be fully charged again.

As they tied up, Zircon said, "Tony and I will work at his midden this afternoon. You two take the boat. We won't need it. I'll walk over and take a look every once in a while, and if we see our friends from the cottage near you, we'll come running."

The boys helped Tony prepare a simple lunch of soup and sandwiches, then all hands retired to the front porch to eat.

Up the beach, there were signs of activity around the frogmen's boat. As they ate and watched, the boat moved away from the pier and approached the reef, where it anchored. Rick went to get the binoculars and focused them on the scene.

Two frogmen, complete with suits, went over the side right where their buoys floated!

"They're diving at the wreck!" he exclaimed.

Zircon took the glasses and watched, then handed them to Tony.

The archaeologist muttered, "Surely they can't be interested in the treasure. It would be simply too much coincidence for them even to know about it."

"Maybe they're just looking to see what interested us," Scotty offered, and his explanation seemed the most plausible.

The group watched until the frogmen surfaced and the boat went back to its pier.

"Scotty has it," Zircon agreed. "From what we've seen, I'd say they simply followed our buoy lines down to see what we had been doing."

"If that's the extent of their interest, I don't see how we could object," Tony said. "Or even if they tried for the treasure we'd have no grounds for objecting. The ship is anyone's property after all these years."

Rick said flatly, "We won't do any objecting, but we'll do plenty of watching. We're going to get that treasure if it's there, whether the fancy frogmen like it or not!"

CHAPTER X

The Wailing Octopus

As Rick steered the *Water Witch* to its anchorage above the reef, he told Scotty about the theory he had developed that morning.

He concluded, "Their going out to take a look where we were diving is another piece of evidence. Unless they were afraid that we might be interested in their stuff—whatever and wherever it is—why would they be so concerned about what we're doing?"

"It makes a lot of sense," Scotty agreed soberly. He looked at Rick with a sudden twinkle. "It might be a good idea to take a look around down below—just so we'll know what to stay away from, of course."

Rick grinned.

By the time they dropped anchor, Scotty had the diving gear rigged and it was only the work of minutes to get into the water. Each carried a spear gun in one hand and a wrecking bar in the other. Ordinarily

they would not have bothered with the guns, but being armed seemed just common sense.

On the bottom, Rick scouted around the wreck, looking for signs of its former structure while Scotty attacked the stern with a crowbar. Under Scotty's prying, a timber suddenly gave with an audible crack, and a huge grouper that must have weighed nearly three hundred pounds rushed past Rick, startling him half to death until he saw what it was.

Scotty hooted in derision as Rick back-pedaled, then he put his bar down and swam to Rick's side. He scrawled on his belt slate, "Whre he cm frm?"

Rick shrugged. It was a good question. They swam slowly around, looking for the grouper's hiding place and failed to locate it. Rick knew the big fish liked caves, rocky clefts, and the interiors of wrecks. This one must have a hole somewhere.

He tried again, going right down to the bottom and crawling along with stomach touching the sand. Even so, he might have missed the hole if stirred-up dust from the fish's sudden departure hadn't indicated where it was. The hole, big enough for him to crawl through, was *under* the wreck, hidden by rotted planks covered with marine growth. He hooted for Scotty's attention and showed it to him.

He took his belt slate and wrote, "Way into shp?"

Scotty nodded and wrote in his turn, "Too drk. Need lites."

Rick nodded. For a moment he was tempted to try ripping off the planks with his bar, but he decided

against it. Any disturbance might very well collapse the entire structure. He wondered whether the hole was just a shallow opening, or whether it actually led into the ship. No matter. They had watertight flashlights with their spare gear in the boat. They could find out on the next dive.

For their remaining time underwater he joined Scotty in his assault on the stern of the ship. They were rewarded by finding what was evidently the interior of a cabin. Rick ripped off another plank, then jumped as Scotty hooted four times for danger. The cabin was the home of a fairly large moray eel! Both boys dropped their bars and grabbed for their spear guns, but Scotty held up his hand in a sign to wait. Rick did so, and saw the big eel emerge and swim rapidly toward the reef.

Scotty had shown wisdom. The moray is hard to kill, and this one would have given them a battle that might have used up more air than they could spare.

The water inside the cabin was murky. Rick looked at his watch. They had only a few minutes left. He wrote on his slate, "Sty dwn til rsrve wrning."

Scotty nodded agreement.

They watched as the water settled and the interior of the cabin grew clearer. Evidently it had been a very small cabin. There was a rotted frame that might once have been a single bunk, and a few broken, almost disintegrated boards that might have been a table. Mattress and bedding had long since

vanished. Then Rick spotted a squarish shape under the ruin of the bunk and motioned to Scotty. They went in after it.

The top crumbled under their touch and silt rose into the water around them. But Rick persisted and felt fabric under his hands. He pulled it out and recognized a seaman's jacket, brass buttons corroded and fabric nearly rotted through. Apparently they had found a sea chest, but their exploring hands discovered nothing but rotted fabrics.

Rick felt the warning constriction that told him he had only minutes left. He pulled down the reserve lever of his tank and touched Scotty's arm. He hooted twice for the ascent.

Back in the *Water Witch,* they connected their tanks to the compressor, put the regulators on charged tanks, then tested their underwater flashlights.

Rick said, "Do you realize I haven't taken a single picture?"

"Why not take some on the next dive?"

"Good idea." Rick went into the cabin and brought out his camera.

The camera was the same one he had adapted for night movies, during their adventure known as *Smugglers' Reef.* He had built an underwater case for it from stainless steel and Lucite. An intricate gear arrangement allowed him to focus or change aperture underwater, and a light meter in the rear of the case told him what setting to use. There was an ordinary

inner-tube valve projecting from one side by which the case could be charged with compressed air to compensate for the pressure of the water. The unit was battery-powered and had a bracket for mounting the infrared light used for night photography.

He unscrewed the front of the case and took the camera from its mount. He hesitated. "Suppose there's enough light down there for color film?"

"There might be," Scotty replied, "but you wouldn't gain much by using color. Everything would photograph in shades of green. Might as well have it in shades of gray."

"You've got a point." Rick loaded the camera with fast black-and-white film and returned it to the case. Then he replaced the cover and disconnected the compressor long enough to pump pressure into the camera case. "Ready to go," he announced.

"Take it easy," Scotty said. "We'd better rest a half hour or so. If we don't knock ourselves out, we can get in three more dives today."

Rick knew the wisdom of that. He adjusted the camera and took a series of "establishing" shots, to establish that the movie had been taken on a boat near an island. Then, when the time came to dive, he photographed Scotty entering the water. At his direction, Scotty got out again, while Rick got in, swam down a few feet, and took a shot of Scotty entering from that angle. Then the camera followed as Scotty flippered smoothly down into the deep water.

Rick followed, camera extended in front of him, sighting through the gun-type sights mounted on top of the case. There was a handgrip on each side, with the controls handy to his fingers. By watching the light meter he could change his exposure as the shifting light required.

He moved ahead of Scotty, panned across the wreck, then reversed the camera to photograph Scotty approaching. On a hunch, he stood well back when Scotty approached the underwater entrance and got a picture that was priceless! The grouper had returned to his home, and frightened by the light that suddenly probed his hide-out, he flashed out and caught Scotty by surprise. Scotty dropped his flashlight and back-pedaled frantically. Grinning, Rick kept his camera grinding. Scotty turned and saw that Rick was shooting, and held both hands to his face in mock dismay. Rick cut and secured the camera to an outcropping with its safety line.

Scotty picked up his light and crawled slowly into the opening. Rick waited, watching anxiously to be sure his friend's hoses and regulator cleared the entrance. Then Scotty vanished inside. In a moment he reappeared, headfirst, and beckoned.

Rick followed him in, his own flashlight extended. It was a little murky from the grouper's hurried departure, but he saw instantly that they were in what had been for those days a large cabin. This must have been the skipper's quarters. His light picked out the

remains of furniture, including one massive chair that was still in good condition.

Scotty gestured with his light and Rick saw an oaken door. He swam over to it and inspected it closely. It was still firm, still in place. Where did it lead?

There was only one way to find out. He took hold of the old-fashioned handle and pulled. The door didn't budge. Rick tried again and failed. He swung himself around and put both feet on the wall next to the door, then applied leverage.

The handle came completely off. Rick sailed backward across the cabin and his tank rang like a bell as it struck something metallic. Scotty hurried to his side, and Rick gestured that he was all right. They turned to inspect the object against which Rick had hurtled and found that it was the still-sound strap for a beam, probably made of wrought iron.

Rick took his belt slate and wrote, "Whre wld he hide it?"

Scotty read it with his light, then shrugged. They began a methodical inspection of the cabin, surprised that it was so clear of marine life. Rick surmised that the opening had developed only recently, perhaps from the shifting of the ship. They found a closet and a heap of what had once been clothes on its floor. Then Scotty made the big discovery of the day. He reached into a shelf space above the bunk, hand exploring, and touched something hard. He drew it

out. It looked like a green-covered bundle about a foot long and two inches thick. But before he had a chance to inspect it further, his air gave out and both boys hurried to the surface on their reserves.

Aboard the *Water Witch* they shed their equipment and sat down to inspect Scotty's find. The covering proved to be layer after layer of oilcloth, wrapped around the object. The outer layers had deteriorated somewhat, but the inner ones were intact.

Scotty finished unwrapping and found a second wrapping of still-dry linen. He pulled the linen off, and both boys gasped. It was a jeweled dagger, with a good-sized ruby winking in its hilt!

"Take it out of the sheath," Rick suggested.

Scotty did so, and disclosed a blade covered with some hard brown substance. "That's not rust. Got a jackknife?"

Rick found one and handed it to him. Scotty scraped and was rewarded by the gleam of bright metal.

"It must have been coated with heavy grease," Rick remarked. "During the years, the grease hardened into a permanent rustproof coating. Wait until the scientists see this!"

Scotty grinned his pleasure. "This is one treasure the log didn't mention. Poor Captain Campion must have thought a lot of it to protect it so thoroughly."

"He might have been taking it to the New World as a gift for some influential friend," Rick ventured. "It looks like Spanish work."

Scotty looked at Rick speculatively. "Are you making a claim on this?"

Rick knitted his brows. What was Scotty driving at? "You found it," he said. "Technically, we're supposed to share and share alike, the four of us and Barby. But how do you split a dagger? And we wouldn't sell it, anyway. It's too nice a souvenir."

"I'll ask Tony and Zircon," Scotty said, "but if none of you have any objection, I would like to claim it, because I want to give it to Dad for a birthday present next month."

Rick punched him on the arm. "You'll get no objection from me. Or from Tony and Zircon either."

"I can buy presents for the family," Scotty said slowly. "I do, on birthdays and Christmas. But I've always wanted to give Dad something really special, something to tell him how I feel about being taken into the family."

Rick nodded. He knew how Scotty felt, and he liked him all the better for it. "Let's get ready for the next dive," he said abruptly.

They went through the necessary checks on their equipment, transferring the regulators to the third set of tanks. Rick decided to leave the camera on the boat this time. He was anxious to inspect the ship thoroughly, and photography took time.

After a half hour of rest the boys went back into the water again, carrying their wrecking bars and spear guns, flashlights on their belts.

An inch-by-inch inspection of the cabin disclosed

no more treasures, but Rick found a plate, still intact. He wondered if it were the plate from which the captain had last dined before the pirate attack, and put it outside the entrance to be carried to the surface.

Once satisfied that the cabin held no secrets, the boys attacked the door. It was hard work, and they raised so much dust that their light beams were almost useless. However, they struggled on until the door finally gave, only to admit quantities of sand.

Rick guessed that the door had opened onto a deck that was now buried far under the sand. They went outside to allow the murkiness to settle in the cabin, and Rick consulted his watch. Their time was nearly up. He hooted to Scotty and they surfaced.

The first tanks they had used were ready now. They shifted the regulators and hooked up another pair to the compressor.

"I'm afraid Tony was right," Rick said. "We'll have to take the ship apart piece by piece."

Scotty examined his foot where the fin was rubbing a little. "What would be a logical hiding place? If I were the captain, I'd probably hide the statue under false flooring or something. Anyway, I'd hide it aft, in officer's country, and not near the forecastle where the crew lived."

"That's probably right. Anyway, we won't have time to do much wrecking today. What say we hunt for loose boards in the cabin?"

Scotty grinned. "The treasure fever has got our

boy Rick. Have you forgotten we were going to see what those fancy frogmen were curious about?"

Rick grinned back, a little sheepishly. "You're right. I had forgotten. Well, we can spend half the time looking for the treasure and the other half looking for the frogmen's cache."

The search for the treasure disclosed no loose boards, or anything resembling a secret hiding place. At the end of ten minutes they turned from the wreck and swam along the bottom toward the reef.

Since they had no idea what they were looking for, the search couldn't be a very carefully planned one. Rick led the way, following the reef, taking time to examine the coral formations. There were countless sea urchins, and enough small fish to feed the entire population. Bigger fish, however, were not plentiful. Once Rick saw a snook that would have been worth taking, but the fish sped off into the watery gloom. Again, Scotty called his attention to a deadly scorpion fish. This small, rather weird-looking little creature had a dangerous defense mechanism in the spines of his back. His poison bore a strong resemblance to cobra venom. The boys gave him a wide berth.

Now and then a moray glared at them with unwinking eyes from a crevice, but the boys paid no attention. The morays wouldn't attack unless disturbed, and there was no reason for disturbing them. Rick wondered if the big one they had ousted from the wreck had found a new home.

They passed a colony of sea worms, colorful even in the green light. The worms were pretty, but their long hairs could give a painful sting.

Their time was growing short. Rick consulted his watch, then his depth gauge. They were at eighty-five feet. Because of the shallower water they would have a little more time, perhaps another five minutes before constricted breathing told them only a few minutes of air remained.

Scotty found a puffer and waved at him, but the fish paid no attention. Scotty motioned to Rick, then reached out and scratched the creature's stomach. It began to gulp water until it resembled a balloon. They left it to return to normal in its own time. On the surface, the puffer would have gulped air in the same way. They had caught them on lines many times.

They were past the *Water Witch* now, Rick estimated. He hooted at Scotty, then led the way up to a depth of about forty feet. There he started back along the cliff.

Suddenly he wished he had brought a game bag attached to his belt. The reef here was alive with shellfish. He identified cowries, whelks, and some excellent specimens of Triton's horn. They would have to come back again, to collect some to take home. The biggest problem was getting the animals out of their shells, unless there were some anthills on the island. Ants would do the job neatly in a few days.

Scotty hooted, and pointed. Directly ahead was a

small shelf. Rick moved to Scotty's side and saw the dark opening of a cave. Next to the opening was a small octopus. As they approached he changed color, trying to imitate the multicolored coral against which he rested.

Rick reached out a hand and the animal retreated, sliding into the mouth of the cave. Apparently this was his home, because the ledge was littered with shells from a number of meals.

Now Rick wished for his camera, then smiled inwardly. To satisfy all his unexpected wishes he would need a sort of underwater trailer to tow his gear.

Scotty moved close to the octopus and it retreated still further. Both boys knew the creatures were harmless to divers, and some divers even handled them. But there were reports of divers being bitten while playing with octopuses, and they had learned long ago that unnecessary risks were foolish.

Rick suddenly rocked back as his ears were smitten by sound. A wail echoed in his head, so intense that it almost hurt. Scotty started, too, and reached for the ledge in his astonishment.

The octopus peered out of the cave, and the wail came again, buzzing uncomfortably in their heads. And in that moment, Rick's air gave out. He pulled the reserve lever and planed to the surface, Scotty close on his heels.

On the *Water Witch* they stared at each other.

"Did you hear that?" Scotty demanded.

"I'll say I did!"

"That octopus wailed," Scotty insisted. "Twice!" He hesitated, then put Rick's thoughts into words. "Only—octopuses don't wail. They don't make noise of any kind."

"This one did," Rick said. "A wailing octopus! This is either a new scientific find, or . . ."

"Or we've found what the fancy frogmen didn't want us to find," Scotty concluded.

CHAPTER XI

Lights on Clipper Reef

"THIS," Hobart Zircon boomed, "is a phenomenon that will rock the science of zoology to its very depths! We will examine this creature and determine his genus and species, and we will name him after you two. *Octopus waili branti-scotti.* Or perhaps *Octopus screami* would be better."

"Of course we're not certain that it was a wail," Rick said soberly. "He might have been singing. He might even have been telling us to go catch him a fish."

Tony Briotti observed, "This may not be an isolated phenomenon. Who knows? A search may disclose screaming squid, or simpering sharks, or burbling barracuda."

"Seriously," Zircon asked, "have either of you a theory to account for this? Or do you really believe that the octopus wailed?"

"We'd be in a better position to answer that if

we'd had a chance to explore the cave," Scotty replied. "How can we tell? Maybe the octopus really did wail, and we were the lucky ones who heard the sound for the first time." He grinned. "We should have wailed back and tried to strike up a conversation."

Rick agreed. "I'm with Scotty. We just don't know. I agree that a wailing octopus is a new kind of beast, but that's not entirely impossible, is it?"

"Perhaps not." Tony stared at the sunset. "I'm trying to recall the physiology of *Octopus vulgaris,* as the garden variety of octopus is called, but my memory isn't working. It isn't beyond reason. After all, some fish make sounds. I've caught croakers myself that were pretty noisy. But I've never heard of octopus sounds until now."

Scotty chuckled. "Haven't I read that octopuses have some intelligence? We might teach him to sing. He'd be a natural for television."

"You say that the sound was loud?" Tony asked.

"Very loud. My head hurt. Did yours, Scotty?"

"I'll say! For a minute I thought my brain cells were rubbing together."

Zircon sighed. "I am stumped. And not only by your Wailing Willie, either. This whole affair baffles me, including the presence of Steve's former tail on this island. Hasn't it occurred to you that those fancy frogmen, as you call them, would have made some overt move by now if they were really interested in us?"

"Dropping the chicken was an overt move," Rick pointed out.

"Yes and no. I'd prefer to call it a not-too-subtle warning. Yet they haven't tried to interfere with your diving around the wreck."

"I've wondered about that," Scotty offered, "and it seems to me they've satisfied themselves that our interest is just in the wreck, and not in whatever they have hidden underwater. If they have anything hidden, I mean. As long as we stick with the wreck, they have no reason for causing trouble."

Tony agreed. "That makes sense to me. Perhaps you can answer this: Why do they wear cold-water suits? It's appreciably cooler at twenty fathoms, but it's certainly not cold enough for a suit."

"We only stay down fifteen minutes," Scotty said. "If we stayed down longer we might get chilled. The water isn't warm by any means down by the wreck."

Rick had a thought. "We're used to cold water, remember? Diving off Spindrift would chill a polar bear, even in summer. Suppose these people had done all their diving in tropic waters? This water would seem cold to them, particularly down deep."

It was nearly dark now, only a glimmer of light in the west. The four sat on the front porch of the cottage.

Zircon asked, "Did you monitor the radio tonight, Rick?"

"Yes, but there was no word from Steve."

"Don't you think he might like to know about the

presence of his shadow on Clipper Cay?" Tony inquired.

Rick pointed to the Sky Wagon resting on the beach. "Trouble is, that's our only communication. I could contact the St. Thomas airport and request that they pass a message, but that would be like broadcasting it to the world. Steve might not like it."

Zircon's deep voice cut into his comment. "Look! Our friends are apparently going to do some night work."

There were lights on the frogmen's boat, and it was putting out. As the Spindrifters watched, it slowly approached the reef, then stopped. Scotty got the glasses and examined the scene. "Something's up!" he exclaimed. "I saw a diver go over the side!"

Hobart Zircon coughed self-consciously. "Do you know, I have taken a certain amount of pride in the fact that I am by nature a conservative individual with a highly developed capacity for minding my own business."

Rick wondered what on earth the big scientist was getting at.

"The pursuit of truth has led me along many devious routes," Zircon continued. "I have tried, with some success and many failures, to plumb the mysteries of Nature. But while I have tried to make the business of our natural universe my own, I have never thrust my not-inconsiderable nose into the business of neighbors. However, this admirable reticence has limits, since, as a scientist, I am also possessed of that

inherent trait of curiosity without which no person can succeed in science."

Rick exploded into laughter. "And what you're leading up to is, you want to go see what those people are doing!"

"Precisely," Zircon admitted.

Tony and the boys roared with laughter.

"Hobart," Tony said with a chuckle, "you never fail to astonish me. And how do you propose to stick your not-inconsiderable nose into the business now going on over there?"

Zircon waved his hand. "The method was developed by our young Mr. Brant, who sometimes shows slight sparks of intelligence. He has a device which projects infrared light, and glasses that allow the wearer to see whatever that light illuminates."

Rick stared. Zircon was proposing that they take his underwater camera and use it for illumination. That must mean . . . "You want to swim over with the lungs?" he asked incredulously.

"And why not?"

"But we've never done any night diving!"

"You tested the camera at night, did you not?"

"Yes," Rick admitted, "but that was in water that we knew, off Pirate's Field at home. And we only stayed in long enough to expose a few feet of film."

"We know enough about these waters to know that there are no dangerous obstructions beyond the reef, at least between here and the *Maiden Hand*."

Scotty laughed. "This is a day I never thought

would come. It's usually the other way around, with Rick trying to sell some idea that everyone else opposes. Why not swim at night, Rick?"

"No reason," Rick admitted. "It was just that it hadn't occurred to me. There's one difficulty, though. I have only two pairs of glasses with infrared-sensitive lenses. So only two of us could go."

"Only two could dive with the camera," Tony corrected. "But all of us could go. Two would remain on the surface, with the floats, in case of trouble."

"Who would dive and who would stay on the surface?" Scotty demanded.

Rick produced a quarter. "Let coins decide. Except for the professor. He thought of it, so he dives."

"Fair enough," Scotty agreed. "All right with you, Tony?"

"Of course. The three of us, then. Odd man goes with Hobart."

Tony and Scotty produced coins. With Rick, they walked into the living room and lighted a kerosene lamp.

"Now," Rick said, and tossed his coin, catching it in the palm of his hand and slapping it onto his other wrist. Tony and Scotty followed suit. Rick uncovered first. He had heads. Tony uncovered and displayed a tail.

Scotty groaned. "Shucks! I lose. It's one of you."

Rick held his breath as Scotty uncovered—another tail! He turned to Zircon. "We dive, while Scotty and Tony stay topside."

"Good. Well, what are we waiting for?"

They changed quickly into trunks, then assembled their diving gear. Rick took the front plate from his camera and put the infrared searchlight on its mounting bracket. He changed to a fresh battery, then replaced the film in the camera with the special infrared-sensitive film.

Whatever the infrared illuminated could be seen through special glass. Rick had ordered lenses ground from the glass and had placed them in frames made to fit into a face mask. These frames could be purchased at any diving-equipment supply house. They had been designed for divers who had to wear their own corrective glasses, and they suited Rick's purpose to perfection. He handed a pair to Hobart Zircon, then inserted the other pair in his own mask.

Zircon, Tony, and Scotty decided to take spear guns. Zircon chose Rick's rubber-powered gun, while Tony selected the light spring gun. Scotty chose the highest-powered gun they had, a new jet-type powered with carbon dioxide.

Rick and Zircon connected their regulators to two freshly filled tanks, then tested the equipment. Zircon tied a rope to his belt.

The big scientist drew them together for a brief conference.

"We'll swim out and cross the reef," he directed. "Then we'll swim along the reef, staying as close as possible to the breakers. They will help conceal us. When we approach the boat, Tony and Scotty will

stop and hold position. Scotty, are the binoculars waterproof?"

"Yes, they are."

"Then take them. Rick and I will go directly to the bottom at the base of the reef. We will then proceed along the reef until we spot our friends yonder."

Rick had an unhappy thought. "Suppose they see us?"

"We will try to prevent them from seeing us. However, if they do, I suggest a retreat in as good order as we can manage. If they should catch up with us, we will bluster and bluff our way on the basis that we were only diving to see if they were trying to search our wreck."

Scotty laughed. "Turn their own table on them. That's very good, Professor."

"I'm glad I'm not a physicist," Tony said piously. "We archaeologists aren't half so devious."

"I am acting in my capacity as a former consultant to JANIG, and not as a physicist," Zircon retorted with dignity. "You will refrain from casting aspersions on my profession, Doctor Briotti."

"My apologies," Tony said, grinning. "In other words, the man is devious, but the scientist is not."

"Exactly. Well, shall we go?"

Rick was glad to get into the water. The camera in its underwater case was heavy in air, but weighed only a few ounces in water. He swam with face mask under, breathing through his snorkel and letting the camera hang.

They crossed the reef without difficulty, then turned to swim along it. The trough just seaward of the breaking point of the waves was the most comfortable swimming position and they went in single file, Zircon leading.

Every now and then Rick looked up. They were getting near the boat, he thought. Perilously near. The boat was anchored just inside the reef, and he could see activity on its deck. Apparently the frogmen had returned from their first dive and were changing tanks.

Zircon stopped swimming and lay motionless in the water. Rick drew abreast of the big scientist, and Tony and Scotty stopped behind them. As they watched, suited figures with belt lights and back tanks climbed down a ladder into the water. A third man, on deck, lowered something to them. It was hard to see, but Rick thought it had a golden glisten and that it was round, about the size of a basketball. The frogmen took it and went under.

Zircon's big hand took Rick by the shoulder, then he turned and motioned to the others that they were going under. Rick shifted from snorkel to aqualung mouthpiece. He took the end of rope that Zircon held out and snapped it to his weight belt. He and Zircon were now connected by a ten-foot length of rope, necessary to keep them from becoming separated in the darkness.

He submerged and dove straight down into the blackness. His thumb compressed the button on the

side of the case and the camera started, the infrared light turning on. A narrow cone of water extending out about twenty feet was illuminated, but the illumination was visible only through the special glasses he and Zircon wore.

Rick held the button until they reached bottom, then suddenly realized he would use all his film before they had even found the frogmen. He groaned silently. Why hadn't he used his head? The light as well as the camera motor were operated by the same button. If he had only thought, it would have been a few seconds' work to change the circuit so the light would be on continuously. Or he might even be able to rig a waterproof switch that would operate just the light.

Well, it was too late now. He jerked on the rope for Zircon to stop, then took his belt slate and wrote, "Cam on whn lite is. Wll use nw & thn." He held it in the beam of infrared light for Zircon to read. The scientist scribbled "OK" under the message, then gave him a gentle push as a signal to go ahead.

Rick held his wrist in the beam and read ninety-two feet on his depth gauge. He calculated quickly. They would have enough air for about twenty-five minutes at this depth.

He held the camera switch long enough to see that there was only smooth bottom ahead, then released it. Almost total blackness flooded in. For all practical purposes it was completely dark, no glimmer of light to mark their way.

A third man lowered something that glistened like gold

For an instant Rick felt panic, but reason reasserted itself. It was instinctive to feel fear under such circumstances, he thought. Not only was he out of his own medium, air, but in a high-pressure realm inhabited by potentially dangerous creatures. He grinned inwardly at the thought. The most dangerous creatures in this vicinity were human.

A twinkle of light stopped him, but Zircon continued on and the connecting line tightened. Rick identified the twinkle as phosphorescence from some marine creature on the reef. There were many such in the ocean. He flashed the infrared light, saw that they were still heading properly, and cut it off again.

The rope at his belt tugged four times for danger! He stopped instantly, letting go of the camera with one hand while he reached for his belt knife. Then he saw what Zircon had seen, a glow in the water ahead and above them. Rick estimated quickly the distance they had traveled. There was no doubt of it. The frogmen were at the octopus cave!

He followed Zircon's lead, cutting the light off and on as necessary, as the big scientist moved ahead. The glow grew in intensity, but they were still too far away to see its exact position, or whether there were men around it.

Rick's heart beat faster, and his breathing speeded up appreciably. In spite of Zircon's plan to claim they were only checking on the frogmen's interest in the wreck, Rick knew that being discovered would mean

serious trouble. He recalled Steve's warning that they were up against a ruthless enemy.

The question was, how close could they get without being seen? He could take pictures at ten feet, but at any greater distance the camera would be useless.

Zircon moved ahead, going slowly now. Rick followed, not bothering with the dark-light unit because the glow in the water was enough for a beacon. Then the glow faded for a moment as a figure crossed in front of it. Still Zircon moved ahead until Rick could see two additional, smaller glows that he identified as the belt lights the frogmen had been wearing.

Zircon continued on, still hugging the bottom, and Rick divined his intention. The big scientist was going to take them directly under the frogmen! It was logical, since the frogmen would not expect danger below.

Rick followed, staying just behind Zircon's flippers, feeling the wash of water from his wake. The light was nearly overhead now, and Rick saw dark figures moving. It was unreal, like a Hollywood motion picture, except that the tense music of a movie production was replaced only by the soft sighing of their regulators.

And with the thought, Rick almost lost his mouthpiece. Their bubbles! Their bubbles would rise right past the frogmen, a dead giveaway! It might already be too late, because Zircon was almost directly under the cave!

CHAPTER XII

Clouds Over Clipper Cay

Rick jerked frantically on the tie rope, four times for danger, then he turned and swam rapidly back the way they had come. At first he felt resistance on the line, then Zircon hurried to catch up. Not until they were barely within seeing distance of the light did Rick stop, then he took his belt slate, started the camera for light, and wrote "Bubbles go by thm if we undr. They see."

Zircon held a hand to his head in a sign of chagrin that he had forgotten, then he wrote, "Hw we gt clos?"

Rick pondered the problem. The bubbles had alarmed him in another way, too. It was possible that the man on the boat could see four sets of bubbles rising where only two were supposed to be. Yet, he couldn't escape the feeling that it was important to get a look at what the frogmen were doing. There was no way out of it. He just had to take a chance.

He wrote, "I mak pass hldng brth so no bbls, tak pix. U sty out of rnge & cvr me wth gn."

Rick had just one hope of getting away with it. He had to assume that the frogmen would be busy with whatever they were doing in the cave. If so, their backs would be to the open sea. At least the chance was worth taking.

Zircon wrote, "OK bt be crfl."

Rick didn't need the warning. Together, they swam back until they were close to the glow of the lights. He hoped that the darkness and breaking surf above were concealing their bubbles. Finally Zircon halted. Rick unsnapped the line that held him to the scientist, squeezed Zircon's shoulder, and swam away from the reef toward the open water. He kept his head turned so he could keep the light in his field of vision.

When he was out far enough he swam upward until he was on a level with the light, and directly out to sea from it. He inhaled, filling his lungs, then with camera outthrust, he drove directly toward the light. It wasn't hard to hold his breath—not with his heart acting as a stopper in his throat.

The light grew clearer. He started the camera and kept moving with powerful strokes. Then he held his legs still and let inertia carry him in a silent glide. He had to get close—close!

The light grew in intensity, and details grew clearer. He saw the frogmen, and their backs were to him! Between them, he caught a glimpse of some-

thing brassy and round, and he saw the octopus, clinging to the reef to one side of the cave.

He held the camera button as long as he dared. Then when it seemed that he would glide right into the frogmen, he twisted sideways and bent backward like a circus acrobat, flippers moving in powerful thrusts. It was an excellent underwater imitation of a wingover, the plane maneuver that reversed direction by diving and turning. He planed downward until he touched bottom, then thrust himself with frantic kicks away from the vicinity of the cave.

His lungs were about to burst, he felt, when finally he drew a deep breath. The gurgling sigh of his bubbles was sheer relief. He kept moving until he bumped headlong into Hobart Zircon. The scientist reached out and snapped his rope onto Rick's belt, then tugged twice.

Zircon led the way along the reef bottom until they reached the spot where, they estimated, Tony and Scotty would be waiting. As they started for the surface, Rick switched on the camera and looked at his watch.

They had been under only ten minutes! And he had been waiting for the warning constriction of air running out!

Zircon broke water and instantly submerged again. He led the way a few feet under the surface to where he had seen Tony and Scotty, then led Rick to the top once more.

Tony and Scotty saw them emerge and without a word turned and started back toward the cottage, pushing their floats. Instead of bothering with the snorkel, Rick kept the aqualung mouthpiece in place and swam a few feet under the surface, guiding himself by the wake of the others. He was tired—and relieved.

The group crossed over the reef and swam to the beach in front of the cottage. There they gathered at the water's edge and stripped off their gear. For long moments no one spoke, then Zircon asked, "See anything, Rick?"

"A little. Enough to get an answer, I think. We haven't discovered a new breed of octopus, because they were installing something in the cave. Something that makes a noise."

"Do you know that, or do you infer it?" Tony asked.

"I didn't hear the noise, if that's what you mean. But what else could it be?"

"Too bad," Scotty said. "Now we won't have a new species named after us. Come on, give us the word. How was it?"

Rick said, with complete truth, "I was scared to death."

"And so was I," Zircon admitted. "At first the sensation of complete blackness caused an emotional reaction. Then I began to see that we had done a rather foolish thing. And I almost got us into trouble by

forgetting that we send up a constant stream of bubbles." He told them of his plan to get under the cave, and of Rick's warning.

"We thought of your bubbles," Scotty told them. "I talked it over with Tony, and came within an ace of diving after you, although I doubt that I could have reached bottom and found you. But we watched, and we couldn't see any bubbles at all. It was too dark, and we were right where the water was breaking."

"My question is, did you get a picture?" Zircon wanted to know.

"I'm sure I did. The camera was going, and it probably saw much more than I did—since cameras don't get scared. But it won't do us much good right now. We can't develop the film."

The boys picked up the equipment and carried it to the *Water Witch*. Rick turned off the compressor. He was too tired to wait until all tanks were full. Time enough for that in the morning.

When he and Scotty returned to the cottage, Tony greeted them with cups of hot chocolate and they sat on the porch and enjoyed them.

"Let's sum up what we know," Zircon invited. "If anyone agrees that we know anything worth summing."

"I think we do," Rick said, "and I think we ought to get it to Steve Ames. We don't know what he's after, or what kind of gang he's fighting, but we know one of them is here."

"Yes, and we also know that Steve's agency is primarily concerned with protecting military secrets," Zircon added. "I agree with Rick. We must get word of these mysterious frogmen to him."

"We discussed that earlier," Tony recalled. "In view of our discussion, it would seem that either Rick or Scotty or both must fly to Charlotte Amalie and tell him personally."

Scotty pointed at the sky. "Have any of you looked up there?"

All of them did. The moon was just rising, and there was enough light to see heavy cirrus moving high overhead.

"There's a front of some kind moving down on us," Scotty said. "And did you notice the swells tonight? Long ones. I'm no first-class weather forecaster, but all the signs are there. We're in for a storm. The question is, how soon will it arrive?"

"He's right," Zircon agreed. "I'm glad you're observant, Scotty. Frankly, I hadn't even bothered looking at the weather. I suppose I thought it would just continue to be perfect."

Rick stared at the gathering clouds for long moments, then put into words the thing that had been bothering him.

"You know, there has been a cloud over this vacation almost from the moment we landed at Charlotte Amalie. We didn't want to get involved in anything but diving and exploring, but we got pulled by the ears into a hot case. Steve warned us off that first

day. The warning didn't help, because we got dragged back into things when we went swimming, and again at the hotel."

Three faces were turned toward him, listening. He was expressing what all of them had been thinking, too.

"We thought we'd leave trouble behind when we came here," Rick continued, "but it was waiting for us. We didn't look for it, until tonight."

He drew a deep breath. "Well, from now on we have to become the hunters. Steve Ames doesn't know there's anything strange going on here. We do, and it's up to us to find out what. The goings-on in the octopus cave have something to do with the case Steve is working on—and what Steve is working on has something important to do with national security."

He smiled grimly. "I know none of you will disagree with this, because it's the only thing we can do. Professor Zircon knew it tonight when he tried to excuse our looking in on the frogmen as curiosity."

Zircon nodded silently.

"From now on," Rick concluded, "we have to operate as unofficial JANIG agents, until we can get word to Steve Ames so he and his men can take over."

CHAPTER XIII

Message in the Storm

THE wind blew. It piled the surf high on the reef and blew the tops from waves between the reef and the shore. Hour by hour the wind stiffened, until the breakers on the shore were higher than those through which the Spindrifters had swum on the reef.

The first hours of the morning were spent getting ready for a blow. The *Water Witch* was secured by springlines, and extra fenders were put over her side. The four hauled the Sky Wagon high onto the beach by sheer muscle power, then turned the plane into the wind. Rick and Scotty salvaged the concrete-block foundation from the wreck of the cottage where they had found the planks, and used the blocks for land anchors on the plane.

The shutters were checked, and closed on the front of the cottage. The shed where the tank had broken through was repaired as well as improvised tools and

materials allowed, and all loose gear was stowed inside.

The rain came. It drove with the wind into the front of the cottage in a continuous thunder. Its force carried it under the door, through cracks beside the window frames. The Spindrifters were forced to shred rags to stuff into cracks. In the kitchen the roof began to leak, and soon every available pot and pan was being used to catch drippings.

Rick worked almost in silence, not joining in the bantering of his friends. As was his way, he worried the problem of the frogmen and their mysterious behavior the way his dog, Dismal, would worry a bone.

He discarded a dozen possible reasons for their actions, including underwater communications, bombs, and an unusual way of fishing. He pondered on the relations of the Spindrift group—or lack of them—with the frogmen and re-examined their various theories.

First premise: The frogmen, specifically Steve's former shadow, hadn't recognized them or the *Water Witch.*

Second premise: The frogmen considered them harmless tourists, interested only in diving to the wreck, and therefore to be watched but not considered dangerous.

He rather liked that one. It would mean that the chicken had been dropped "mischievously," to use Zircon's word, to try to scare them out of the im-

mediate vicinity. But there were other possibilities.

First premise: The frogmen knew of their connection with Steve.

Second premise: The frogmen weren't worried about people with JANIG connections.

This might be explained by superior weapons in the hands of the frogmen, coupled with the assumption that the Spindrifters had no communication with Steve. It might also be explained by knowledge of their real reason for being on Clipper Cay.

Rick didn't care much for the last two premises. The first one seemed more reasonable. After all, they were not sure that the former tail had seen the *Water Witch* in St. Thomas, or had known of their connection with it. On the contrary, to get to Clipper Cay so soon after the Spindrifters arrived, the frogman must have left about the same time the scientists did. There was even a possibility that he had arrived ahead of the Spindrift group and that the frogmen's boat had been out when Rick and Scotty had first spotted the diving equipment in the house. Anyway, there had been no sign of any tail but the Virgin Islander while they were around the pier and on the *Water Witch.* Either he or Scotty would almost certainly have spotted a second man—especially since they had seen him before.

There was a major precaution, however, to be taken: he and Scotty must not let Steve's former tail get a good look at them. They had to assume he had

recognized their clumsiness for what it was—a deliberate stall.

Scotty poked him, and Rick suddenly realized that he had been leaning for quite a long while on the broom he was supposed to be using.

"Made up your mind about anything?" Scotty asked.

Rick knew his friend had been watching him. During their many adventures each had developed a rather unusual understanding of how the other's mind worked.

"Partly," Rick replied. He told Scotty his thoughts.

"You make sense," Scotty agreed, then added practically, "but I don't see what difference it makes, whether they know about our connection with Steve or not. The moment they catch us snooping they'll assume we're enemies. Until then, they'll let us alone just as they've been doing."

Zircon and Scotty joined forces to prepare lunch. The temperature had dropped sharply, and hot soup and hamburger sandwiches were welcome.

After lunch, Rick braved the storm long enough to go to the *Water Witch* for his camera. He returned to the cottage soaked to the skin. "We'll need diving equipment to go outside if this keeps up," he announced.

He took the camera case apart and disconnected his circuits, then he went outside again with tools in hand and got into the Sky Wagon. The plane had a heater switch that would do. He removed it, leaving

the wires to dangle for the moment. If the heater was needed he could put the wires together.

That done, he sat in the plane and racked his memory for a source of sheet rubber. There was none, but he recalled a repair kit for the plastic floats in their tool supply. He found it and took it back to the house.

Using the awl blade on his scout knife, he bored a hole through the plastic back of the case and installed the switch. Then he reconnected his circuits so the new switch would turn on only the infrared light. He waterproofed the switch as best he could, making gaskets from a rubber jar ring he found in the kitchen.

He knew, however, that the switch wouldn't be waterproof under pressure. He took a sheet of plastic repair material from the float repair kit and shaped it carefully with his knife. After much trial and error he succeeded in cementing it onto the case so that it would protect the switch from the outside, but left enough slack for the switch to be operated through the flexible patch. Satisfied, he put it aside to dry.

It was nearly time for dinner when he finished. He took a hand in cooking ham and eggs with fried potatoes, while Tony prepared a salad and made coffee.

As they ate, Zircon gestured toward the front of the house. "Getting worse instead of letting up. This must be a hurricane, although I've never heard of one quite this early in the season."

"If it gets much worse we'll have to anchor the cottage," Scotty observed.

They finished just in time to tune in for the weather forecast from St. Thomas. According to the announcer, the storm was now centered off the island of St. Croix, moving in a northwesterly direction. That meant it would pass St. Thomas, and perhaps come very close to them. The announcer said, "While the storm has many of the characteristics of a hurricane, including the general form and wind velocities, we hesitate to designate it as one."

"In other words," Tony said, "it's a hurricane but we'll call it something else because it's too early in the season for hurricanes."

"Whatever it is, we'll have more of it," Zircon stated.

Rick switched to the Navy command frequency in time to intercept a conversation with a destroyer somewhere off the British Virgin Islands. The destroyer had just lost one of its boats.

At four minutes after six the air went silent, then a new voice took over the microphone. The voice said:

"A message for the ones who hunted blue sheep."

"That's us!" Rick gasped.

When Steve had dispatched Rick, Scotty, and Zircon to Tibet, it had been with the cover story that they were going to hunt the blue sheep called Bharals in the mountains of West China. Only Steve would know that. The message was from him.

Static crackled, but the message was clear:

"The one who started the hunt needs the biggest hunter. Only the biggest hunter. He should be delivered as soon as possible. Call your usual contact before arrival and say that the doctor is coming and to notify the patient."

The message was repeated, while the four strained to be certain they had heard every word. When normal traffic resumed, Rick switched the set off.

"It appears," Zircon said slowly, "that I'm wanted."

"Yep." Scotty grinned. "The demand is there, all right. But delivery is a long way off."

The storm punctuated his words.

CHAPTER XIV

Below the Dark Coral

THE sky was overcast, ceiling about two thousand feet, visibility about two miles. The wind was moderate and steady. Rick examined the water in front of the cottage and told his friends, "I can take off all right. But I don't want to leave without a weather report or we might find ourselves with no place to land."

"I'm going to swap this radio for a newspaper," Scotty grumbled. He had been trying without success to get a weather report.

Tony Briotti looked at the Sky Wagon, brows furrowed, then asked, "Rick, couldn't you turn on the radio in the plane and get a weather report from the airport at Charlotte Amalie?"

Rick was climbing into the Sky Wagon before Tony finished. Of course he could! He called, "I'm a chump!"

The set warmed and Rick called the airport, then

held the phones to his ears to hear the reply through heavy static. When the airport answered he asked for a weather report for the area between St. Thomas and Clipper Cay. He got it, and climbed out, his face thoughtful.

"The storm is having a pup," he told the others. "We're in a lull at the moment. The main storm swung off to the north, but there's another one right on its tail. We have just about time to get to Charlotte Amalie and back before the second one closes us in."

The group went into action fast. All four pushed the plane into the water. Zircon ran to pack a bag, and Tony went to get the film Rick had taken for Zircon to carry to Steve. Scotty and Rick went through the check list, inspecting the plane for possible storm damage. Then Rick started the engine and warmed it up. By the time they were ready, Zircon was climbing aboard.

Scotty yelled, "Tony and I will keep the home fires burning. Don't waste any time, Rick!"

"I won't."

Zircon closed the cabin door and Rick taxied out. In a few moments he was air-borne, swinging seaward over the north end of the island. He looked down and saw two of the frogmen. They were in front of the house, watching the plane.

"Be sure to tell Steve everything," Rick reminded the big scientist, "and don't forget to give him the film. I won't have time to see him, unless he meets

the plane. But it doesn't matter, because you know everything Scotty and I do."

"I'll be glad to get actively to work on this confounded business," Zircon stated. "I'm so curious about that brass ball the frogmen had in the cave that I'm about to burst."

Rick set a compass course for St. Thomas, flying just under the clouds. When they were a half hour out he contacted the airport again and asked for the weather. The report hadn't changed. He told the airport operator, "The doctor is coming. Please notify the patient." He could almost see the operator jerk to attention as the headphones gave out a crisp "Roger."

He sat down on a heavy chop at Charlotte Amalie, and the Sky Wagon gave them a rough ride as he taxied to the pier. Lieutenant Jimmy Kelly was waiting in a Navy sedan with an armed guard in attendance.

Rick supervised the refueling of his plane at the pier gasoline depot, a task he would not delegate to anyone else. The presence of attendants made it impossible to talk to the Navy lieutenant.

As Rick tightened the gas cap, Jimmy Kelly said, "Hop into your great mechanical bird and shove off, birdman. You'll just about beat the weather home as it is. Don't stop to fish on the way."

"I won't. Professor Zircon will tell you an interesting story. And we'll be monitoring the command channel at six for any advice you can give us."

"Okay. Don't get your feet wet."

Rick waved good-by to Jimmy and Zircon, then taxied out to the clear area and took off. The ceiling was lower than on the trip in, and he almost missed Clipper Cay because of strong winds and low visibility. He spotted the southern tip of the island just in time to avoid going right on by. He landed with beads of perspiration on his forehead. If he had missed, with luck he might have hit Puerto Rico, but more likely he would have had to make a landing in the open ocean.

Scotty and Tony came to greet him.

"We were worried," Tony said. "It's closing in fast."

"I got a little worried myself," Rick admitted. "Anything new here?"

Scotty gestured toward the northern end of the island. "Our pals have been busy, diving. They got the brass ball, or whatever it is, and stowed it aboard their boat. I kept an eye on 'em through the binoculars. Also, I suspect they're going to do some more diving, because they left their equipment on the boat."

Rick didn't particularly care at that moment. The flight back had been something of a strain. "Let 'em go," he said. "We can't do anything about it, anyway—not in broad daylight. Maybe tonight we can take a look."

They spent the afternoon indoors, napping or reading, unable to swim or fish because the second storm

had arrived on schedule. Then, a few minutes before six, Rick turned on the radio to the Navy command channel.

At six on the nose, the radio emitted: *"A message for the blue-sheep hunters. The blue sheep seen by the big hunter and the little hunter is important. Obtain more information if possible. But remember that the owners of the sheep are also mighty hunters. The snapshots of the sheep were fine."*

The message was repeated. When they were sure there was no more, Rick switched the set off. "Well, we're in it, and with Steve's blessing. Now what?"

Scotty shrugged. "Now we steal the brass ball. Didn't Steve's message say to get more information?"

"Apparently the pictures turned out well, if I understood that reference to snapshots correctly," Tony said. "Be serious, Scotty. What can we do next?"

"Keep an eye on the frogmen, I guess, and play it by ear. I can't see anything else to be done. We probably could steal their brass ball, all right, but they'd know at once who had done it because we're the only other people on the island."

"Have you looked recently to see what they're doing?" Tony asked.

Neither boy had. Both went to the front porch, but the frogmen's cottage was invisible through the driving rain. "We'll have to go see," Rick said.

"After dark," Scotty added. "In about an hour. It will be pretty dark then."

"Do you suppose the brass ball is still on the boat?"

Rick inquired thoughtfully. "We might be able to sneak aboard after dark and get a picture of it from close up, and we could examine it and have something definite to report to Steve."

"That's a possibility," Scotty admitted. "Anyway, we can get ready."

Rick rechecked the camera and infrared unit. He loaded the camera with a fresh roll of film. Then the three sat in the living room over coffee and listened to the storm batter at the front of the house until it was nearly dark outside.

"What now?" Tony inquired. "Do we all go? Or just one of us?"

"No point in all of us getting soaked," Scotty said. "Have you had any experience in this kind of spying, Tony?"

The archaeologist had not. He grinned. "Until I came to Spindrift, I led a rather quiet, academic sort of life. Except for the war, of course."

"Then Scotty or I had better go," Rick said. "Or both of us."

Scotty shook his head. "No need for both. It's only a reconnaissance, anyway. Toss you for it."

Rick produced a coin. "All right. Call it." He flipped it as Scotty claimed heads. It was a tail.

"Best two out of three?" Scotty invited.

Rick grinned. "And after that, best three out of five?"

Scotty growled, "All right. I'll go." He got ready by taking off shoes and socks. He could change his shirt

and shorts when he returned. He slipped through the back door and was gone.

Rick turned on the radio, tried for a weather report, and settled for a Miami disk jockey who was playing some good records. The static was bad, but the station came through clearly enough to make listening worth while.

Scotty was back before a half dozen records had been played. He sat down, ignoring the water that dripped from him. "Listen, our friends just rounded the northern tip of the island in the boat and they're heading south just inside the eastern reef. What do you make of that?"

Rick pictured the movements of the enemy boat from Scotty's description. "They can't be putting out to sea, otherwise they'd be outside the reef. And they're not interested in anything on the island or they'd have walked. I'd say they're planning to do some night diving on the eastern side of the island."

"In this kind of weather?" Tony asked incredulously.

"Sure. It's stormy on top, but once you're below the wave motion it's quiet as ever. They could dive."

Scotty stood up. "If they can, so can we."

There was no denial to that. They made a trip to the *Water Witch* and collected their equipment, then planned what they would do.

"We'll all use lungs," Tony said. "We have three regulators and there are plenty of full tanks, enough for two dives each. However, we have only two pairs

of glasses for the dark-light camera. I'll yield to Scotty as the more experienced diver, so you and he use the glasses, Rick. I'll stay on top, or near the top, with a single float, and a gun. If I use the lung I can stay submerged most of the time and not have to fight waves."

"Lash yourself to the float," Scotty cautioned.

"And we'll use a buddy line," Rick added. "The same one the professor and I used. Scotty, you take a gun, and I'll take the camera."

"If I see any trouble in the making, I'll bang on my air tank," Tony said. "You should be able to hear that for quite a distance."

There was nothing else to be planned in advance. They picked up their equipment and went out the back door into the storm, crossing the island through the palms. As they emerged onto the eastern shore, Scotty called, "Look—about five hundred yards north."

The lights of the frogmen's boat, visible as bright halos through the rain, were tossing violently just inside the eastern reef. Apparently the boat was anchored. The rain was too thick for them to see any movement aboard, or to see details of the boat itself.

"Move carefully," Rick cautioned. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the storm. "We haven't explored this shore. It may be full of coral heads."

"I doubt it," Scotty returned. "It would be too dangerous for the boat in this kind of weather, even if they knew a channel."

"Rick's right about careful movement, nevertheless," Tony replied. "We must move with care, especially near the reef." He indicated his float. "I'll never be able to tow this through that water, so I'll leave it in the palm grove. We can pick it up on the way back. We shouldn't need it with lungs, anyway. Do you boys have rescue packs?"

The packs were plastic floats compressed into packages no larger than a cigarette pack. They contained a carbon-dioxide cartridge and could be inflated simply by squeezing them, which punctured the cartridge. The boys had carried them on their weight belts for so long that they took them for granted.

They donned their equipment, then walked down to the beach. The surf was not heavy, since the wind was blowing from the opposite side of the island. Nevertheless, there was enough water motion to lift a fine screen of sand and dust.

"The camera will be useless until we get into deeper water," Rick called. "Let's rope together and swim straight out."

They waded in, awkward in the fins, until they were deep enough for swimming. Then all adjusted mouthpieces and started out. Rick tried the infrared light intermittently, but not until they were in about twenty feet of water did the roiled bottom allow its use. He led the way to the reef, the others following in file.

The reef was closer to the surface than on the

western side. Rick had to swim along it until he found a place where they could cross without being buffeted by breakers. Once across, he swam down the face of the reef, knowing that the trip was hard on Tony, because the underwater world was completely dark to one without light, or glasses with which to see the infrared illumination.

Rick found a fairly level shelf at about thirty feet and swam along it, keeping close to the reef wall, until he thought they were in the vicinity of the frogmen. Then he pulled twice on the tie rope in a signal to surface, knowing that Scotty would pass the signal along to Tony.

He emerged in a rough sea, only yards from the point on the reef opposite the anchored boat. He was in time to see two frogmen climb down the boat's ladder. They got into the water and the third man, on deck, lowered the brass object to them.

Rick had no fear that they would be seen from the boat. Their heads would be hidden by the breaking waves, and their bubbles would merge with the natural foam.

He saw at once what their tactics should be. He pulled Scotty and Tony to him, then let his mouthpiece drop. Putting his lips close to their ears, he said softly, "If it's like last time, they won't be down long. Scotty and I will track them to find out where they go, and watch what they're doing. Then, after they leave, we'll see if they left anything behind."

Scotty and Tony nodded. Tony untied the line that

had held him to Scotty. Rick replaced his mouthpiece, cleared a little mist from his face mask, and led the way down.

This time the infrared light operated continuously. Now and then Rick worked the toggle switch through its loose plastic covering and shut the unit off while he searched for visible light. He found it, far down the face of the reef.

The camera made it easy, and his mind was at rest because this time nature had made it impossible for their bubbles to give them away to surface watchers.

There were heavy swells on the surface. He knew it because of the pressure surges on his ears. But otherwise there was no sign of the storm. He grinned because he suddenly realized that he felt dry. On the surface, with the rain beating at him, he had felt like a drowned kitten.

Moving with the confidence gained in his first experience, he led the way seaward, then went to the level of the light. Soon they were close enough to see the frogmen working over something on a coral ledge on the reef face. They hovered motionless, watching, and as one of the frogmen moved they saw that it was the brass ball.

Rick started his camera. He had an advantage, because the frogmen were concentrating on what they were doing, their backs to him. He moved in cautiously, camera grinding, then backed away again when he thought he had enough long shots.

One frogman moved away a few feet, and Rick's breathing stopped as the man's belt light flashed toward him. Had the frogman been looking, he could have seen the boys, but he was too interested in the second frogman's actions.

The second frogman crouched over the brass object, hand moving.

Rick recoiled as a wail lanced through his head with painful impact. He felt the rope tighten as Scotty involuntarily drew away.

It was not the octopus, then! It was the brass ball that wailed. But why? For what possible reason?

The frogmen were apparently satisfied. One of them picked up the powerful light they had been using and turned it off. Then, with only belt lights, they started back up the reef.

Rick waited until the lights were no longer visible. He glanced at his depth gauge and wrist watch. They were at eighty feet, and they had plenty of air left. He swam to the brass ball, camera grinding.

He had never seen anything quite like it. The brass sphere was mounted on a box about twelve inches square and six inches high. From the sphere, two rounded projections thrust out. He identified a waterproof switch on the box, and two small knobs mounted on calibrated plates. These were obviously controls, but he had no idea what they controlled.

Steve would want a few close-ups. Rick worked his camera focus and took shots from every angle. When

he had enough, he pulled twice on the rope in a signal to surface. Scotty motioned to him to lead the way.

As Rick started up, four metallic clangs, irregularly spaced, rang faintly in his ears.

Tony, banging his tank in the signal for trouble! Rick instantly changed course and followed the bottom, watching the water overhead for any sign of the frogmen. When he had reached a spot below the point on the reef where Tony should be waiting, he turned toward the surface, moving slowly, searching for any sign of activity. There was no sign of whatever had alarmed Tony.

He paused a few inches under the surface, then carefully put his face into the air. Scotty surfaced beside him.

There was no sign of Tony. Rick peered through his mask and saw that the boat was still anchored in the same place. There were figures on its deck. Four of them— Four! He ripped his mask off for a clearer look, and his heart skipped a beat. The frogmen had Tony!

CHAPTER XV

How Sings the Gay Sardine?

Rick and Scotty held a hurried consultation, mouth to ear.

"We'll have to get him," Scotty whispered urgently. He held up his spear gun. "I've only got one shot in this."

Rick's instinctive reaction was the same. They had to rescue Tony! But they also had a job to do.

"Wait," he cautioned. "They probably don't know we're here. Tony wouldn't give us away. If they find out, we'll lose the pictures, and we may make it worse for Tony. Let's stay right here and watch."

Scotty subsided. They floated motionless, eyes on the boat, peering to penetrate the mist. The rain had let up somewhat, but the air was far from clear.

Rick would have given the treasure they sought to be able to hear what was being said on the boat. The three frogmen were all facing Tony, and the conversation seemed to be pretty animated. Then, as he

watched, the boat pulled up anchor. It moved north.

"They're taking him to their house," Scotty gasped.

The boys swam frantically for shore, recklessly crossing the reef without regard to the danger of cutting themselves on the sharp coral. They reached the beach and shed tanks and equipment under the palms, then raced for the frogmen's house.

They could see the lights of the boat as it rounded the northern tip of the island, and, lying among the palms, they watched it tie up at the pier. Tony and the three frogmen got off and walked down the pier. Rick strained to see, and could not find any sign that Tony was covered by a gun. But that wouldn't be necessary, anyway, since he was outnumbered three to one.

The four marched up to the front door of the frogmen's house and stopped. The boys were prone under a palm less than twenty feet away. One of the frogmen said, "Let me get a jacket. I'm getting chilled. Then we'll walk you home."

There was something very odd here! Rick nudged Scotty and they backed slowly away. When they were sure they could not be seen, they stood up and ran on silent bare feet through the palm grove, circling to approach their own cottage from the rear.

At the back door they paused. "Now what?" Rick said helplessly. "They're bringing him home. Why?"

"I wondered about that while we were running. I think they're bringing him home to check up on us. He must have sold them some kind of yarn."

Rick nudged Scotty to back away

"Steve's tail will recognize us!"

"Not if we're in bed," Scotty answered quickly. "We'll pretend to be asleep. Come on."

"Just a minute." Rick hurried to the shed and got two short hand spears. He handed one to Scotty. "Here. Have a bedfellow."

A few minutes later they heard footsteps and voices on the front porch. The door opened. A strange voice said, "Your friends don't seem to be here." The voice hardened. "I thought you said they were?"

"They're probably in bed," Tony replied mildly. "We go to bed right after dark because there's nothing to do."

"Except stick your nose in other people's business," a harsh voice snapped.

Tony replied tartly, "I've already apologized for letting my curiosity get the better of me."

"I'd like to see the bedrooms," a third voice said. Rick thought it belonged to the man they had taken off Steve's tail.

He lay motionless as a form blocked out the lamplight from the living room. In a moment the voice said, "They're asleep, all right. They must sleep soundly."

"Young men do." Tony sounded relieved.

Rick grinned to himself. The archaeologist couldn't have known they were in bed, but his stall had worked.

"All right. We'll be going. But keep in mind that

the most stupid thing anyone can do is to dive alone, even by day. At night it's worse than stupid. It's sheer insanity. Also, we'll thank you and your party to keep away from us and not gum up our recordings with your flipper noises and bubble sounds."

"We will," Tony said. "Good night."

The front door closed. Scotty rose, slid open the window, and went out. Tony scraped a chair in the living room. Rick stayed where he was, in case the frogmen had lingered outside. In a few moments he heard the back door open and close, and he tensed, but it was Scotty's voice that spoke.

"They're gone. I just wanted to make sure."

The three gathered in the living room, and Tony chuckled. "If I associate with you two for much longer, I'll get to be the world's champion dissembler."

"What happened?" Rick demanded.

"Simple and unlucky. The two frogmen surfaced practically under me. My own fault, because I had moved much closer to the boat. I think one of them almost fired a spear at me, but the other stopped him. They invited me to go aboard, and I didn't think it wise to refuse the invitation."

"I imagine not," Rick commented grimly. "Then what?"

"Naturally, they demanded to know what I was doing. I admitted to overpowering curiosity that got the better of my manners. They wanted to know who I was and why I was on the island. I told them the

truth, of course, at least partly. I identified all of us. Then I'm afraid I told a slight untruth. I said we had found reference to the *Maiden Hand* in an old manuscript, and were diving in hopes of finding cannon and other old things which we planned to sell for museum pieces to pay for our vacation. I believe they accepted my story."

"It's a good story," Scotty approved. "Just enough truth to make it ring true."

"They've been watching us," Tony went on. "They asked why the plane had gone, and why it had come back with only the pilot. I told them Professor Zircon had cut himself and gotten a coral infection, and that the doctor at Charlotte Amalie felt that he should stay there for treatment."

"I guess they haven't recognized Scotty and me as the two who stopped Steve's tail."

"Seems not," Tony agreed. "Well, I admitted that I was still curious about their activities, since night diving is not common. So they told me a story."

The boys waited breathlessly.

"These gentlemen thirst for scientific knowledge," Tony said with a grin. "They claim an interest in ichthyology, but they know less about fish than any cat does. Their story is that they have developed an underwater recording device with which to make recordings of fish noises. Since they have some evidence that certain fish make their noises only at night, it is obviously necessary to make recordings at night. So they dive, leave their equipment, and pick

it up the next morning. Our diving too close to their gadget creates false sounds, especially our bubbles. Therefore we are requested politely but firmly to stay away."

Scotty whistled.

Rick laughed. "Quite a story," he said.

"I pointed out the obvious," Tony went on, "that it was strange they should choose a stormy night. Their answer was that storms upset fish, and they thought it possible that some sounds might be obtained only under storm conditions."

"Very interesting," Rick remarked. "It's a good story, and if we didn't know Steve was after at least one of those men, we'd probably believe it!"

"Fish noises!" Scotty exclaimed. "If they knew we'd been snooping around before, they'd probably claim that the octopus really did wail, and that they were only recording him. Your gag about screaming squid and burbling barracuda would appeal to them, Tony."

The archaeologist chuckled. "Anyway, we got out of that one pretty well. I had a little trouble banging my tank. Didn't want to do it overtly, of course. Finally I managed to get in position while we were swimming to the boat, and I banged my tank against one of theirs. But how did you know what to do?"

Rick explained briefly, then he broke into a smile again. "These guys are smart," he declared. "I like that fish-recording story."

"It's appealing," Tony admitted. "I'm almost

tempted to pay them another call tomorrow to ask if they have captured for posterity the hunting cry of the wild sea trout, or the love song of the gay sardine."

"But you won't," Scotty said practically. "You certainly came out of that mess with a whole skin, Tony."

Rick laughed. "He's adventure-prone. And lucky. How do you beat a combination like that?"

CHAPTER XVI

The Deadly Spring Gun

THE storm blew itself out by noon of the following day, leaving an overcast sky and heavy swells. An inspection with the binoculars showed that all was quiet at the frogmen's house. Their boat was tied to the pier.

"They probably recovered the brass ball during the night," Rick observed, "or perhaps early this morning."

"The question is," Scotty remarked, "did they take the gadget to the octopus cave?"

Tony joined them on the porch in time to hear Scotty's query. "I can shed some light on that. It happens that I woke up at dawn and looked out to see how the weather was behaving. The frogmen were anchored off the eastern reef in the same place. We can assume that they picked up the brass ball and put it back in the cave near the wreck."

Rick rubbed his hand over his short hair in a ges-

ture of bewilderment. "But what's their game? What do they get from the brass ball?"

"I rather imagine Steve Ames would like to know the same thing. If you boys have no objection, I think I'll spend the afternoon at my midden. What are you planning?"

Rick looked at Scotty. "Dive at the wreck?"

"Sure. Frogmen or no frogmen, there's still a golden statue of St. Francis somewhere down there."

After lunch the boys checked their equipment, being particularly careful because they had not rinsed out the regulators with fresh water after every dive. Their small supply of water, coupled with the odd hours at which the equipment had been used, was the reason. They took a little water from their supply and used it to clean the regulators. The rest of the equipment would just have to wait.

Tony departed for his Indian midden, tools slung over his shoulder. The boys started the compressor to fill the tanks used the previous night, then untied the *Water Witch* and headed for the diving area. Scotty scanned the frogmen's house through the glasses, but saw nothing of interest.

They anchored just outside the reef and looked for their buoy. It was gone, probably torn away by the storm.

"We can find the wreck again," Rick said. "No trouble. I could find my way around here in the dark." He grinned. "I have!"

"Shall we take a look in the octopus cave too?"

"A quick one. I doubt that we'd see more than we saw last night. Our job now is finding out what kind of information the frogmen get. And I don't know how we'll do that."

"Wait for a break," Scotty replied. "Come on. Let's get into the water."

It was cold. The storm had blown in colder water from the open sea. Rick felt goose flesh and wished they had brought along midseason suits.

The water was murky, too, because of the sand and silt stirred up by the storm. The murkiness started about twenty feet below the surface. Not until they were over fifty feet down did the water clear again. The light was reduced somewhat by the murk, but visibility was good. Rick had brought his camera to take motion pictures around the wreck. There would be enough light.

Scotty carried the big jet spear gun. It was powerful enough to spear sharks or big barracuda, just in case the frogmen decided to be "mischievous" again.

Rick led the way to the octopus cave, glancing up now and then to make sure they were alone in the water. The little octopus was in his usual position on the ledge.

Scotty, spear gun extended, swam right into the cave. Rick followed, holding the camera tightly to his chest to keep it from scraping on the coral. Scotty had his flashlight going, so Rick didn't bother with his own.

The cave was just about large enough for both of

them. It was a typical coral formation, not much different from the reef outside, except that the brass ball was in the center of the rough floor.

The boys examined the cave thoroughly and saw nothing of interest. Rick pushed at Scotty's shoulder and swam out again. Scotty followed. The octopus watched them go.

The wreck of the *Maiden Hand* was just as they had left it, and the grouper was back in his comfortable cabin. He departed at high speed as the boys appeared. They had agreed to start work aft of the captain's cabin, and the wrecking bars were carried under their tank harnesses for the purpose. Both were convinced that there was nothing more to be found in the cabin, although the possibility remained that false boards in the floor or walls might conceal the statue.

Rick tied his camera to a projection, then took his wrecking bar and looked for a place to start. Scotty pointed to a place where there were boards aft of the cabin they had already uncovered, and they started to work.

By the time they had pried off the first few boards it was time to surface. They went topside and changed tanks, then rested for half an hour. There was no sign of activity at the frogmen's house, nor could they see Tony at work on his midden, since the location was hidden by palms.

Rick said thoughtfully, "The brass ball might be some kind of signaling device."

"What kind of signals?"

He didn't know the answer to that. "Anyway, since it's underwater, if it sends out anything it must be sound impulses. Otherwise we wouldn't hear it wail. And what good is sound if not for signals?" added Rick.

"Sonar," Scotty reminded.

The boys were familiar with sonar because of the Spindrift work on the Submobile. Very high frequency sound impulses were sent out, and the echoes were timed or used in other ways. It was the way in which bottom tracings were made by surface craft, and the way in which Navy ships detected submarines. It could be used for locating schools of fish.

"It could be sonar of some kind," Rick agreed. "But what good would it do anyone to stick a sonar device on an island like this?"

And there speculation stopped again, the question still unanswered.

They dove to the wreck and continued the hard labor of taking the aft end of the ship apart. When they finally got the new area cleared of rotted boards and timbers it was only to find a cabin already filled with sand.

Rick borrowed the spear from Scotty's gun and thrust it down into the sand. It slid in easily, meeting no obstruction. He probed with it but found nothing except more sand.

Discouraged, he wrote on his belt slate, "Mybe no bottm. Flr of cbn my be gne."

Scotty nodded. He lifted his hands in a gesture of inquiry. Now what?

Rick thought about it for a moment. Tony had been right! They probably would have to remove every board in sight, carrying the ship away piece by piece. But then what? There was the distinct possibility that the statue was somewhere under sand, and they had no way of removing the sand to see.

It was apparent that most of the ship was under the sand—if the remainder of the ship was still intact. But Rick couldn't escape the feeling that Captain Campion would have kept the statue close to him. And that meant in the aft part of the ship, the part that was exposed.

Scotty hooted twice, pointing at his watch. It was time to surface. The next dive would be their last for the day.

On the surface, Rick sounded discouraged as he said, "The cabin we uncovered might not even have a deck. There may be nothing but a mile of sand under it. And there isn't much of the aft part of the ship left to explore, either. I guess tomorrow we can plan to take the captain's cabin apart board by board."

"We'll need Tony and Zircon for hard labor like that," Scotty answered. "Notice how quickly you get tired down there? Also, we use air a lot faster when we work."

"Let's just sort of make a survey this time," Rick suggested. "We can probe for any cracks we might

have missed, and I'll take some over-all shots of the wreck. Then we'll call it a day."

They followed Rick's plan. He took pictures of Scotty, with wrecking bar, prying at likely places in the exposed part of the ship. But Scotty uncovered nothing of interest. In one place his prying disturbed another moray, who demonstrated his anger at the intruders by trying to fasten his needle teeth in the wrecking bar.

A metallic clang caused them to lose interest in the eel suddenly. They looked at each other, then turned and swam toward the apparent direction of the sound. At that moment a distant wail struck their ears.

The brass ball!

Rick wondered. He had heard no boat noise. The brass ball must be operating automatically. He hooted for Scotty's attention, then pointed toward the cave.

Scotty checked his spear gun and motioned for Rick to lead. Rick pushed his camera in front of him and made his fins move rapidly. There might be some outward sign when the ball sounded, something that would tell them a little about its mechanism or purpose.

As the cave came in view he coasted, looking upward. The murky layer prevented his seeing very far, but there was no one in sight. He let inertia carry him toward the cave, then swung upright in the water as

he saw that the octopus had moved a little distance from the cave mouth.

Instinctively Rick knew that something was wrong, but it was too late to get out of harm's way.

A frogman emerged from the cave, spring-type spear gun pointed directly toward them. The frogman held the brass instrument in his free hand.

Even as Rick hooted a warning, the frogman fired!

His spear lanced through the water directly at Scotty!

CHAPTER XVII

Trapped in Twenty Fathoms

SCOTTY writhed to one side, and the fact that the frogman had fired from too great a distance gave him time to dodge. The spear went by, and Scotty lifted his own gun to return the shot.

Rick, senses suddenly acute, glanced upward again in time to see two more figures descending through the murky layer. He hooted for danger!

Scotty glanced up, too. Then, instead of firing, he sped forward and thrust the tip of his spear at the frogman's chest. The frogman lifted his hands high. Scotty jerked the man's face plate loose, then turned swiftly and motioned to Rick.

Rick followed, fins driving, as Scotty led the way into deeper water in the direction of the wreck.

The frogman who had been in the cave was temporarily out of things. His Scuba was the type that combined the breathing apparatus with the full face plate. He could clear the face plate of the water Scotty had let in, but it would take a little time.

Suddenly Scotty shot upward. Rick turned and looked over his shoulder as he followed. The second two frogmen were in clear water now, and both had spear guns!

Scotty led the way into the murky layer, then leveled off and swam horizontally. Rick wondered what kind of evasive action his pal was planning, but he followed without trying to communicate with the other boy. In a situation like this, Scotty's instincts were dependable.

Rick stayed close to Scotty in the murky layer, swimming at his side and a little behind. After a few yards Scotty dove again, into clear water. Rick looked around but could see no sign of the enemy. Apparently the frogmen had followed and were still in the murk.

Scotty shot downward, Rick at his side. The wreck was directly below them. Scotty didn't hesitate. He let his momentum carry him right through the grouper's front door into the cabin. Rick followed, half expecting to see Scotty and the grouper meet head on, but the fish hadn't returned.

Inside the cabin, Scotty switched on his flashlight, took his slate, and wrote, "Thyl thnk we wnt bk to bot. We sty hr lng nuff thy fnd out we nt thr & cm bck lkng fr us. Thn we go up to bot."

Rick nodded his understanding. It was good strategy, provided they timed it right. The frogmen would assume the boys had returned to the *Water Witch* when they went up through the murky layer. They

would examine the boat, then dive down again. At that time, if he and Scotty could time it right, the two groups would pass in the murky layer and the boys would emerge while their enemies were still descending.

He looked at his watch. They had only a few minutes of air left. The frogmen would have more air, not only because they had entered the water after the boys were already on the bottom, but because they had not descended so deeply.

He wrote, "Rlax. Brethe easy."

The less effort they made, the longer their air would last. For a moment he debated suggesting that they share one tank by trading the mouthpiece back and forth, but that would leave one of them practically without air when they had to leave. He tried to imagine the movements of their enemies. The frogmen would be on the surface now, approaching the boat ladder with caution. They couldn't be sure the boys were not waiting in ambush.

Both boys had switched off their lights and were resting motionless in the darkness of the cabin. A little light filtered through the hole near the roof, but not enough to see by.

Suddenly the light was blocked out!

Rick reached for his belt knife and Scotty thrust the spear gun forward, then both relaxed a little. The grouper had returned.

The big fish turned at the opening and backed into his hole. He hovered in the opening, holding position

while he stared out into his watery kingdom. Apparently the fish had no idea that the boys were in the cabin. When it came time to leave and they touched him or hooted at him, he would get the surprise of his life.

Even in their predicament, Rick could see the humor in the grouper's reaction. He wondered if groupers were subject to heart failure from shock.

Rick returned to trying to imagine the movements of the frogmen. Now they would be cautiously boarding the *Water Witch,* one up the ladder, the other climbing the anchor chain. They would be careful, still unsure whether or not the quarry was aboard.

He thought he felt constriction in his lungs from the warning signal that his air was running out, but finally decided it was only his imagination.

Now the frogmen would be aboard the *Water Witch,* making a quick search, spear guns ready to fire their lethal shafts. Now they would be in the cabin and shouting their disappointment.

Now the frogmen would be hurrying back into the water, readjusting their face masks, ready to dive.

The grouper shot out of the cabin with a flick of his powerful tail that raised the silt around them.

Rick's heartbeat faltered. The grouper had been alarmed. They had mistimed!

Right now, the frogmen were outside the *Maiden Hand!*

CHAPTER XVIII

The Fight on the "Maiden Hand"

THEY had only one hope now—that the frogmen would make a quick survey of the wreck, then go away. The boys waited tensely, ears alert for any sound that would tell them the whereabouts of their enemy.

There was only the sound of their bubbles.

Rick pressed close to the opening and peered out. The water that could be seen from the entrance was clear. However, it was only a narrow sector. For all he knew, the frogmen might be right overhead.

He backed down into the cabin and pushed his camera into a corner. He could get it later. Right now he preferred to have both hands free. He wished for a spear gun, to double their armament. But the other guns were on the *Water Witch.* The wrecking bars were useless, too. It was almost impossible to strike a blow against the resistance of the water.

Something scraped outside, and both boys froze.

There was no doubt that the frogmen were at the wreck. Why didn't they go away? They couldn't know about the entrance to the cabin—or could they?

The moments dragged by. There couldn't be much air left in their tanks. Rick risked holding his wrist close to the opening and saw that his watch showed one minute of diving time before shortness of breath would signal time to turn on their air reserve and surface.

Time was critical. If the frogmen didn't go away before their air ran out, they would have to surface, if they were allowed to by the enemy. With luck, Scotty could account for one. But that would leave two, both armed. By this time the first frogman would have blown the water from his mask and recovered his spear.

No, it would be dangerous for Scotty even to take time for a shot, unless he could fire without pausing. Their best bet was to make a run for it, depending on speed.

On land, he was sure he and Scotty could outrun the enemy, but in the water, speed depended on skill with the fins, and the power of leg strokes. He doubted that the frogmen were much faster than he and Scotty, but there was an excellent chance that their speed in the water was equal.

He conserved his air, spacing his breathing, taking only enough air to keep comfortable.

There was another scraping sound, and he knew

the frogmen were still around. Were they actually searching the wreck? If so, they might find the entrance.

And then Rick suddenly discovered a new danger!

Their air bubbles had been floating to the top of the cabin, forming a pool under the ceiling. But they had stayed in the cabin so long that enough water had been displaced to bring the pool of exhausted air close to the entrance, which was only a few inches below roof level.

In a moment the air would spill out, and rising bubbles would warn the frogmen!

He gripped Scotty's shoulder and pointed to the silvery mass of exhausted air that curled perilously close to the entrance.

The other boy saw the danger at once. He wrote on his slate, "We go whn air duz," and held it in the light for Rick to see.

Rick nodded. He drew his belt knife.

There couldn't be many breaths left before the air spilled out. Nor could there be many before warning constriction forced them to turn on the reserves. At this depth the reserve wasn't very great.

He saw Scotty reach for his reserve lever and pull it down. A moment later he had to pull his own.

Something rang like a struck tank, almost directly overhead!

The lip of the bubble pool moved from the water motion caused by pulling their reserves. Rick watched it, scarcely breathing.

The air pool trembled. A tiny bubble broke loose and sped upward.

Rick squeezed Scotty's arm, then with a powerful thrust of his flippers he shot out into light, right into the stomach of a frogman!

He thrust with his knife, and a hand gripped his wrist and twisted. Scotty shot from the hole in the wreck and turned, fins flailing. His spear gun belched carbon dioxide, and the deadly spear ripped into the leg of one frogman.

Rick flailed arms and legs, trying to break free of the grip that held him. He saw the wounded frogman fire his spear at Scotty. The boy moved just in time, and the shaft shot between his arm and side.

Scotty let go of his useless gun and grappled with the frogman, reaching for his knife with one hand while he gripped the frogman's wrist with the other.

Rick knew their air was running out fast. He felt a knife glance from his tank and heard the ring of metal. He struggled for footing and turned in time to thrust a flippered foot into the stomach of the frogman behind him.

Next to him he caught a glimpse of Scotty and his opponent rolling in the water, and he saw the shimmer of metal as a knife flashed.

Arms locked around his throat. He reached backward over his head and his hands touched rubber. He gripped and pulled with all his strength and felt the man's face plate come free.

The frogman who had lost his mask suddenly

threw off tanks and weight belt and sped for the surface.

The odds were even! Rick locked with his opponent and felt powerful arms drag him close. The man had more strength than he! He fought to break loose, and couldn't!

Then the mouthpiece was pulled away from Rick's lips in mid-breath, and he choked on sea water.

Without air—twenty fathoms down!

Frantically he fought, locking his air passage so his last lungful couldn't escape. He got a hand free and caught his opponent's hose where it joined the tank. He pulled with all his strength and felt it give. Bubbles rose in a cloud.

He would have sobbed if he could. It was the wrong hose! He had only torn loose the exhaust. He groped and found the intake hose, then, lifting his knee and thrusting for leverage, he pulled with all his strength. The hose gave! The grip on him loosened.

Rick was now desperate for air! He pulled the quick release on his weight belt and felt it drop away, then he kicked for the surface, frantic with fear for Scotty. Had he gotten free? Had he? His last view had been of his pal locked with the remaining frogman!

Bubbles streamed from his mouth as the compressed air in his lungs expanded under the decreasing pressure. He let himself exhale as he rose, fighting against panic and the impulse to lock the

remaining air in his lungs. That would be fatal, he knew, and he willed himself to act properly. He kept his fins moving, knowing that, if he kept his head, he would make the surface.

He passed through the murky layer and saw the surface like a wrinkled silver sheet far overhead. Straining, he swam for it, letting out his breath as the pressure on his lungs demanded.

There was another boat hull in the water, almost over him! He angled away, to avoid coming up under it.

And suddenly there were forms around the boat. A cry tore from his lips and was swallowed in the water.

More frogmen! More enemies, when they were already defeated!

CHAPTER XIX

JANIG Takes to the Water

A FIGURE dove to meet Rick. He angled away, fighting the impulse to breathe, keeping the compressed air moving out of his lungs. The figure angled with him, then suddenly sheered off. Rick shot past and the figure followed.

These new frogmen were diving in midseason suits. He was aware of nearly a dozen of them. He didn't count them; with his terrible need for oxygen he didn't care that much.

He knew he would make it. He had to! But where was Scotty?

Rick shot to the surface, went right through it, his impetus carrying him into the blessed air. He gulped a great lungful before he fell back with a splash, and as he hit water his fins were flailing, to carry him toward the hastily glimpsed shore.

A masked figure surfaced beside him and called, "Take it easy!"

He only moved faster. The frogman caught him

easily, because the power was gone from his leg strokes now. But he had enough strength to fight. He reached for the frogman's face plate, and a strong arm pushed him back.

A voice penetrated his consciousness. "Stop it, Rick, or I'll have to let you have one."

The frogman knew his name! He hesitated, fist pulled back to throw the best punch he had left, and the new frogman back-pedaled.

"Hold it," the frogman called, and lifted his face mask.

Rick stopped moving, staring numbly.

Jimmy Kelly! Lieutenant Kelly!

"I'll tow you to the boat," the lieutenant called. "Relax."

Rick obeyed, head spinning. He was a little groggy, and he couldn't make sense out of things. How had Kelly got here?

And Scotty! Where was Scotty? He started struggling again, calling his friend's name.

"He's all right," Kelly said urgently. "Relax, Rick!"

Rick caught the words, and they penetrated. How did Kelly know Scotty was all right? But the lieutenant had spoken with authority, so he relaxed.

Kelly towed him to the landing stage of the ship Rick had seen, a destroyer escort. Willing hands lifted him from the water. He slumped down on the edge of the stage, shaking his head to clear it while Navy frogmen stripped his aqualung harness from him and pulled the mask from his face.

A voice said, "Drink this."

A mug of steaming black coffee was thrust into his hand and he sipped, grateful for the spreading warmth it brought.

Suddenly he started again. "Scotty! Where is he?"

"Up here, Rick, with me."

He looked up, and his eyes focused again—on Tony and Zircon!

A motor whaleboat drew up to the landing stage, and two husky frogmen handed up a suited figure. "Here's one, Lieutenant," a frogman called.

"All right, Danny. Where's the other?"

"Heading for the reef at top speed. Jonesy's after him."

"Go help Jonesy haul him in."

"Yes, Sir." The motor whaleboat veered off and sped toward shore.

A frogman surfaced almost at Rick's feet. He instinctively drew back, and the frogman gripped the edge of the stage, spat out his mouthpiece, and pulled up his mask with the other hand.

Rick found himself looking at Steve Ames! What was he doing here?

"Where's the brass ball?" Steve asked.

"I don't know."

With an effort Rick pulled his scattered wits together. His mind began to work again. Obviously, through some miracle Steve and Zircon had arrived on a Navy ship with Jimmy Kelly and a detachment of Navy frogmen.

Scotty called from on deck. "It's at the octopus cave, Steve. I saw one of the frogmen drop it there."

Steve hauled himself out to the landing stage. He grinned at Rick. "Feeling better?"

"Much," Rick said. He was beginning to feel nearly human again.

"Let's go on deck. I want to find out about this octopus cave."

Rick stood up, and was surprised to find that he didn't wobble. He followed Steve up the ladder to the deck and found Scotty seated on a canvas stool, sipping coffee.

Zircon asked anxiously, "Are you all right, Rick?"

Tony said, "Here's the doctor for a look at you."

A young Navy officer joined them and motioned Rick to a canvas stool. He applied a stethoscope and listened, then grunted his satisfaction. "He seems all right. Pulse a little fast, but that's to be expected. You had a slight dose of oxygen starvation. Feel better now?"

Rick nodded. He was beginning to feel wonderful. They were out of it, and with whole skins.

Scotty grinned sheepishly. "I abandoned you. I had to, because I ran completely out of air. I shoved my man away and headed for the surface. I felt pretty guilty about leaving you with two of them."

Rick returned the grin. "I felt the same way. I thought I'd abandoned you. But I see you got to the surface first."

Steve accepted a cup of coffee and squatted on the

deck, facing them. "Suppose we start from the beginning. What happened?"

Rick told him, starting from the moment when they had heard the brass ball wail. He finished, "There were three of them. Did you get them all?"

"Yes. Including one with a spear through his leg. The last one is just being hauled aboard now. He tried to get to the island."

Jimmy Kelly and a group of frogmen joined them. Jimmy asked, "How about the sounding gear, Steve?"

"We'll ask now. How about that octopus cave? Where is it?"

"We'll take you," Rick said. "Let us get tanks from our boat. There should be a pair fully charged by now."

Steve shot a look at the doctor. The officer shrugged, then nodded. "Okay, if it's a short dive. They've had plenty for today."

"Chief? Where are you?" Kelly called.

A frogman stepped from the rear of the group. "Here, Sir."

"Check their regulators, please. If they're okay, hook up fresh tanks. If not, loan them complete outfits."

"Yes, Sir."

"Thanks, Chief. Then get set to come with us. Danny, Jonesy, Mike, and Dick come along, too. Bring still and motion-picture cameras. When we get down, split into two-man teams and search the area. You know what we're looking for. It's just like the one we found off St. Croix."

Rick stared at the frogman officer. Another brass ball off St. Croix? But there wasn't time for questions.

"Quick dive, please," Zircon requested. "These boys have had enough."

"They're through as soon as they show us the cave," Steve agreed. "Come on, gang. Let's get to it."

Rick carefully checked his equipment, something that no diver can ever take for granted or leave to someone else, while Scotty did the same. Then they put the equipment on and adjusted face masks. Their knives, Rick's camera, and Scotty's spear and gun were somewhere near the wreck. They would have to get them another time.

The group entered the water. Rick looked around and oriented himself by the position of the *Water Witch,* then led the way with Scotty, Steve, and Jimmy swimming along with him while the Navy frogmen stayed closed behind.

It was a thrill for Rick to be swimming with the famous UDT frogmen. He looked to the side and saw that Steve was perfectly at home in the water, and he marveled at the adaptability of the JANIG agent. Steve hadn't been joking when he said he would be an expert by nightfall.

At the reef Rick turned northward and led the way toward the level of the cave. A few moments later he hooted for attention and with pointed finger showed it to Steve and Jimmy. The octopus was still there.

A frogman swam over and picked the little crea-

ture up. The octopus spurted away, leaving a blob of ink behind. He came to rest above the cave, poised for further flight.

Rick swam down to the sandy floor of the cave and began to search for the brass ball. Scotty beckoned, and they swam together toward the spot where Scotty had last seen it. The frogmen swam to the bottom with them, then fanned out, searching.

A few moments later someone hooted, and a tanned, muscled frogman swam over, holding the object triumphantly.

Steve Ames pointed to the surface and Jimmy hooted an order. The group swam leisurely up through the murky layer, oriented themselves by the sleek shape of the destroyer escort hull, and emerged at the landing. The frogman who had found the ball handed it up to Hobart Zircon.

Steve Ames motioned to one of the frogmen. "Run these fellows over to the beach, please, then wait and bring them back." He turned to the boys. "Put on dry clothes. Then come on back. We need to talk."

An hour later the boys, the scientists, Steve, and Kelly were seated at a table in the destroyer escort's tiny wardroom, noses twitching over the savory steaks that were being served. The boys ate like starved men, talking a steady stream between bites.

Rick sighed and let out his belt. "Well, that's our story. What's yours?"

Steve stirred his coffee thoughtfully. "I can make it short. We don't know the whole story yet, but we

will by the time I get back to St. Thomas. Have you two any idea what these brass-ball gadgets are?"

"We decided that they were probably sonar equipment of some type," Scotty said. "But we couldn't figure out what they were for."

"Easy," Steve said. "Although you couldn't know, of course. They were for spotting submarines."

Rick stared. Submarines?

Steve saw his look of bewilderment. "It happens that our new atomic-powered submarines are conducting manuevers in this area. Does that help?"

It did! Light slowly dawned. "Then these were scanning our subs! But I still don't see why it would be any problem to find them. The subs must have equipment that will tell when sonar beams hit them."

"They do. And that's a big part of the story."

Steve sipped his coffee for a moment. "These sonar devices are a new type, and very cleverly designed. They don't send out a continuous beam. Instead, they operate in bursts, in a random pattern. They might send out a beam twice in a minute, or wait an hour between bursts. The beam is a powerful one. It's effective for an extraordinary distance."

"The wail, of course, was the beam operating," Zircon interjected. "You didn't hear the beam itself, since that's ultrasonic. But you did hear the mechanical vibration of the brass ball. It had a kind of subharmonic effect that was audible."

"That's right," Steve agreed. "Anyway, there were several different stations, in different locations. Some

were on islands, some on fishing boats. Since they operated only in short bursts in a random pattern, the subs—and the special teams we sent out—were never able to get a bearing that meant much."

"They must be self-recording," Rick said thoughtfully, "otherwise the enemy couldn't get the information out of them."

"They are. Whatever echo they get makes a tracing inside the box they're mounted on."

Scotty objected, "But what kind of information is it? How can anyone tell anything about the subs from such recordings?"

"By putting all the recordings together and running a rather complex analysis. The analysis will give speed, depth of operation, maneuverability—if the spies are lucky to have beams operating at the right time—and number of torpedoes fired, with the same information on the torps. That's enough information to make it worth an enemy's while."

"I'll say!" Scotty turned to Zircon. "And what were you doing, Professor?"

"I'm afraid I arrived on the scene too late to do much good," Zircon boomed. "However, I believe we can be useful in preventing such occurrences in the future. I have an idea for an improvement in our scanners that will allow a fix to be made on such beams."

There was a pause when dessert arrived. The boys savored excellent apple pie smothered in a generous helping of ship-made ice cream.

"We thought Zircon might help us work out a system of getting fixes on the transmitters," Steve said. "As it happened, we got a lucky break. The subs happened to have their devices pointed at St. Croix simultaneously when a beam scanned them. They got a fix on it. We flew a team of frogmen down in a Navy amphibian right in the middle of the second storm. They found it, and got the men who were handling it. One of them talked."

Jimmy Kelly picked up the story, "You arrived with Zircon at about the same time the St. Croix team took off from our base, and headed right into the storm. They didn't get back until late last night, and it was nearly dawn before we got the story from the man who talked. Then we loaded on this DE and headed here."

"I'm glad you didn't wait ten minutes longer," Rick said fervently. "They foxed us. I kept listening for their boat, but they didn't use it."

"They probably decided to swim out and sneak up on you," Zircon stated. "After capturing Tony last night, their suspicions were probably aroused somewhat. Even if they swallowed his story entirely, it would be only good sense to check up."

Tony looked hurt. "I'm sorry you don't think my story was enough to allay their suspicions entirely. But speaking of listening for their boat, why didn't you hear this ship coming? And why didn't the fancy frogmen?"

Rick thought that one over. "We wouldn't have

heard the ship until it was very close because of the noise our bubbles make. But we should have heard it about the time it left the reef opening near our cottage. I don't know why we didn't."

"And I don't know why we didn't see it," Scotty added. "It's big enough to be spotted at horizon distance."

Jimmy grinned. "We pulled a fast one. We had enough steerageway to drift over your position after a few turns of the screws down by the reef passage. You see, we didn't know what was going on, so we took no chances. Then, when we got into position, we got into the water without waiting to anchor. We dropped anchor right after we got both of you out, but you probably didn't notice."

"I couldn't have cared less, at that point," Rick said, and Scotty echoed the sentiment.

"The reason why you didn't see us coming is that we came from the other side of the island. It's safer for a ship that draws as much water as this one. Tony spotted us as we approached the southern point."

Steve grinned. "Anyway, it's a good idea to move in on an objective as quickly, silently, and invisibly as possible."

"Have you captured the rest of the stations yet?" Rick asked.

"No. But we have teams out, and they know where to go and what to look for, thanks to the man who talked last night."

"Who are these people?" Scotty demanded.

Steve scratched his chin. "Well," he said finally, "you might put it this way: they're people who have no business knowing what they're trying to find out."

Rick hid a grin. He knew perfectly well they would get no more information out of Steve. The essence of security is to give information only to people who have a need to know it. The Spindrifters had no reason for knowing the identity of the enemy, apart from their own curiosity. One thing was certain, though, it was another nation that wanted the information.

"You're probably tired of answering questions," Rick said, "but I've got one more. How did you happen to arrive right in the nick of time?"

"Nothing very mysterious about it," Jimmy Kelly answered. "We steamed up to the island and sent a boat ashore, with Professor Zircon. Dr. Briotti had seen us approach, and he met the boat. He told us you were diving. Zircon had assumed as much since we could see your boat anchored on the reef."

"I told them about last night," Tony added.

"Yes, and we sent a party of men to the house up the beach to capture these fancy frogmen of yours. The house was empty. Since their boat was tied up, we made a quick assumption that they were out on the reef with you. We did a fast run out . . ."

"And got the fright of our lives," Steve finished. "We knew there were three of the enemy and two of you down below, and we could see only three sets of bubbles. We thought you were done for."

"It was remarkable the way Lieutenant Kelly and his men got ready to dive," Zircon said. "I've never seen people move so fast. Steve, too. Then, just as they were about to go over the side, we saw two more bubble trails and knew at least that you were still alive. But in a moment the entire pack of bubbles merged."

"We hit the water," Jimmy Kelly said, "and were about to dive when one of the enemy skyrocketed up. He was blue in the face and scared witless. We hauled him out and then started to dive again. And along came Scotty, half dead and babbling about you. I started straight down to get you, but you met me halfway." He grinned. "You weren't in very good shape, either, for a few minutes."

"How about the men? Where are they?" Scotty asked.

"Down below. Locked up, with an armed guard at the door."

Steve Ames finished his coffee and sat back with a sigh of satisfaction. "I'm happy," he announced.

The boys grinned. He looked it.

"Glad you wound this up so fast," Zircon boomed. "When will you return to Charlotte Amalie?"

Steve looked at Jimmy Kelly. "You in a hurry?"

"Not particularly. Now that this case is over we go back to some pretty dull routine. Why?"

"Oh, I thought your boys might like a little recreation."

Jimmy looked suspicious. "Any sailor likes recrea-

tion. The more the better. The UDTs enjoy it more than most. What's on your mind?"

Steve's wave took in the four Spindrifters. "It wasn't their fault one of the gang talked his head off last night. If he hadn't, their work here would have given us a lead we couldn't have gotten in any other way. Suppose we repay 'em."

Jimmy sighed. "Get to the point."

"Keep the ship here tomorrow. Turn your boys loose to help find the treasure they're after. You've got equipment they need. Besides, I'm sure your gang can find some nice souvenirs if they put their minds to it. Old cutlasses, cannon, cannon balls—things like that."

"It's a deal." The UDT lieutenant chuckled. "I'll try a little souvenir hunting myself. Of course, since it's unofficial, I'll have to ask for volunteers."

"Think you'll get many?" Rick asked anxiously.

Steve and Jimmy laughed. The lieutenant said with a chuckle, "If one of them doesn't volunteer I'll turn him over to the doctor, because I'll know he's sick. The UDT's volunteer because they like to swim. It isn't often they get a chance like this, to dive just for fun."

"If we don't find the treasure," Scotty said with satisfaction, "it'll be because it isn't there!"

CHAPTER XX

The Buried Secret

AT FIRST, the captured frogmen were defiant. They insisted that the Navy had nothing on them. The brass ball wasn't theirs. They were only sport divers having some fun.

Then, faced with the unassailable fact that Rick had taken motion pictures of their activities, they lapsed into sullen silence and refused to talk.

Rick and Scotty watched Jimmy Kelly check the diving equipment of the frogman teams lined up on the destroyer escort's deck. Beyond the teams they could see the three enemy frogmen, taking the air under the watchful eye of a shotgun-armed sailor.

"I wonder if we'll ever get the full story," Rick mused.

"We've got all we need," Scotty answered. "What pieces are missing?"

"Well, I'm curious about the chicken. I think we hit it when we decided they wanted to scare us out

of the octopus-cave area, but it would be nice to know for sure. And why did they take the sonar equipment to the eastern reef during the storm?"

"Probably to make a recording as a routine check. They couldn't assume all sub activity was taking place to the west."

"But how can we be sure?"

"We can't. We can only try to figure out what happened, based on what information we have. For instance, there must have been a sonar unit near where we swam at St. Thomas. It's the only thing that could have got the shadow so excited. But what difference does it really make? We know most of the story, and we can guess the rest."

"Steve may be able to fill in some pieces later," Rick observed. He liked to have a thing wrapped up neatly, with no loose ends hanging. Still, that was almost impossible in a case like this.

Jimmy Kelly called, "You boys ready to go?"

"Whenever you are," Rick called back. He picked up his heavy three-tank block from where it rested against the rail and handed it to Scotty. While his friend held the rig, Rick got into it. Then he performed the same service for Scotty. The tanks were heavy.

Tony and Zircon, similarly equipped, came out of the amidships cabin with Steve Ames. Jimmy had loaned equipment from the frogmen's supplies, to enable the group to work around the wreck longer.

The search party assembled on the landing stage.

Jimmy had split his teams into two groups. They would dive in relays.

"We'll look the situation over, then get to work," Jimmy instructed. "How many have wrecking bars?"

Four of the UDT gang held them up.

"All right. Turn and turn about. Work for ten minutes then pass them to your mates. Watch your hoses, especially when working inside. Okay. Let's go."

They slipped into the water four at a time, Rick and Scotty in the first four. Once in the water, the weight of the heavy tanks vanished. The boys had removed weights from their belts to allow for the extra tanks and for more than ten additional pounds of air on the descent.

A pair of frogmen payed out a heavy rope, taking the reel down with them in order to provide a direct link from wreck to ship. On the way up the divers would pause at knots in the rope to decompress, allowing time for compressed nitrogen to get out of their blood streams.

With the boys and the scientists, Jimmy went over all visible portions of the wreck. He summed up his attitude with an elaborate shrug and spreading of his hands that said he didn't know where to begin. For his frogmen, he made a sweeping gesture that told them to tackle the wreck anywhere. The frogmen moved in, operating in pairs. The water clouded rapidly with silt, particles of marine growth, and fish eggs.

The top of the captain's cabin came off. Rick

swam in through the murk and picked up the chair that had seemed to be in good condition. He carried it to clear water and placed it on the sand. Now that it was out in the open, it could be seen that teredos —shipworms—had feasted on it and burrowed into it until it was nothing but a chair-shaped shell.

The same was true of the cabin interior. It collapsed soundlessly under the prying bars of the frogmen. Under their enthusiastic attack the water was soon so roiled that visibility at the wreck was reduced to almost zero. Jimmy sounded the signal for ascent and the group surfaced without decompressing. They had just about exhausted a single tank.

On the landing stage, the lieutenant said, "No use continuing until the water settles. Any ideas, Chief?"

Sanders, the group's chief petty officer, replied, "I think we're going to need a sand hose, Sir. Most of the wreck is buried."

Jonesy, a short, husky frogman with a bright-red crew cut, added, "Sir, I think the cannon and stuff would be on the deck ahead of the cabin we opened up, but the deck is under the sand. Could we rig a hose, Sir?"

"Good idea. Put a detail to work, Chief."

Sanders called out four names and issued instructions. Jimmy called a ten-minute break for the rest.

During the break, Rick sought out Steve Ames. He commented, "You know, this wasn't a very well-organized gang. I keep thinking about the two who tried to get us at St. Thomas."

Steve disagreed. "You're wrong. It was a *very* well-organized gang. Their trouble was not enough trained agents. They had to hire extras, and the extras were just ordinary mugs, and not very bright ones. It was the mugs who made the mistakes, not the real agents."

Jimmy Kelly spoke up. "Did we tell you? We got reports from the other UDT teams this morning. Our people have all the stations except one in British territory. Maybe our British cousins can get the station team for us. We've tipped them off."

The lieutenant finished a glass of orange juice and rose. "Time's up. Let's get back to the wreck."

Hobart Zircon asked, "Don't you want to take your camera, Rick?"

"Good idea." He hurried to get it. One of the frogmen had picked it up, along with the rest of the equipment they had left behind.

The water had settled enough for thorough inspection of the entire aft portion of the wreck. Rick and Scotty helped the frogmen poke into every possible place without finding more than a pair of rusted cutlasses.

Rick surveyed the scene with discouragement. The statue was somewhere under the sand, which probably meant they would never find it. He had another sudden realization, too. They had no proof that this ship was the *Maiden Hand,* no proof that the whole business wasn't just a wild-goose chase.

By the time the dive was over, the sand hose had

been rigged. The first group surfaced and Jimmy ordered the fresh group of frogmen to hose out the aft cabins to find anything that might be left. Then the group was to start work on the probable location of the foredeck.

During the rest period, Rick told Jimmy about the other wreck they had found, the modern ship that he guessed was a war casualty.

"We'll take a look at it first thing in the morning before we shove off for St. Thomas," Jimmy promised. "You never know what you'll find in a wreck. We've found a lot of things worth salvaging."

The boys were operating under Navy rules now. They put on fresh tanks and got their instructions from Chief Sanders. "Longer decompression this time. Stick with me on the way up and move when I move. We don't want you to get the bends."

The boys nodded their understanding, then took to the water.

The frogmen below were still hosing sand. Water forced at high pressure through the hose that ran down from the ship sent the stuff swirling in great clouds. The boys watched. They couldn't do much looking around until the water settled.

Then they saw that the frogmen weren't waiting. They swam into the murk, feeling around with their hands. Rick saw one emerge triumphantly holding a round object that could only have been a cannon ball.

He and Scotty plunged in, too. Working with the frogmen they rapidly assembled a treasure trove of cannon, more cannon balls, cutlasses still in good condition, and useless ship's gear.

Fifteen minutes later a frantic hooting brought them in a rush to where Jonesy was holding something. Zircon and Tony got there at the same time, and soon all work had ceased while Jonesy's find was examined.

Tony took his belt knife and scraped. Then he looked around at the watching group and nodded. He clasped his hands together and shook them like a fighter mitting the crowd.

Rick and Scotty hooted their triumph. Jonesy had found the statue of St. Francis!

The boys, the scientists, Steve, and Jimmy carried the treasure to the surface. The rest of the frogmen continued hunting for souvenirs.

On the landing stage they put the statue down with loving care. Even under the marine growth they could make out the cowled figure of the sainted monk, head bent over the fawn he held in his arms.

Tony went to work. Soon there was a gleam of gold that brought a yell of triumph from the boys. Then —amazingly—the gleam of dull silver.

"Hobart, look at this!" Tony exclaimed.

The big scientist knelt and examined the silvery streak. He borrowed Tony's knife and probed, then his laugh boomed across the water.

"We are the victims of our own research!" he roared. "All this trouble—over a statue of lead!"

"Lead!" Rick stared incredulously. This couldn't be true! "There's gold, too," he pointed out.

"Apparently gold leaf over a lead base," Tony said with a sigh. "No, Rick. Hobart is right. This is lead."

A call from the water made them look up. Chief Sanders and his diving buddy had surfaced, and they were carrying a statue of St. Francis!

Behind them, another pair of frogmen, with still another statue!

Within a half hour there were no less than eight identical statues lined up on deck. St. Francis, in lead, repeated eight times.

Scotty scratched his head. "Well," he said finally, "we certainly found St. Francis! In fact, we overdid it a little."

Not until long afterward did they learn the answer. Tony Briotti, a scientist of great persistence, did some research in England during a European trip to attend a conference of archaeologists. He found that the *Maiden Hand* had carried several dozen St. Francis statues, for sale to churches and individuals in the New World. Captain Campion had considered only one special enough to mention, because it had been blessed by the Cardinal of France and entrusted to his care for delivery to the Governor of Barbados.

The Spindrifters took one statue as a gift for Barby. A cutlass was Rick's share of the loot, while Tony took the bar shot they had found near the wreck

and Zircon selected a cannon ball. It was understood that the knife Scotty had found was to be his, so that he could present it to Hartson Brant.

A few quick dives the following morning disclosed nothing of interest around the first wreck they had found, but Jimmy identified it as a common type of small cargo vessel. Then the destroyer escort sailed for St. Thomas.

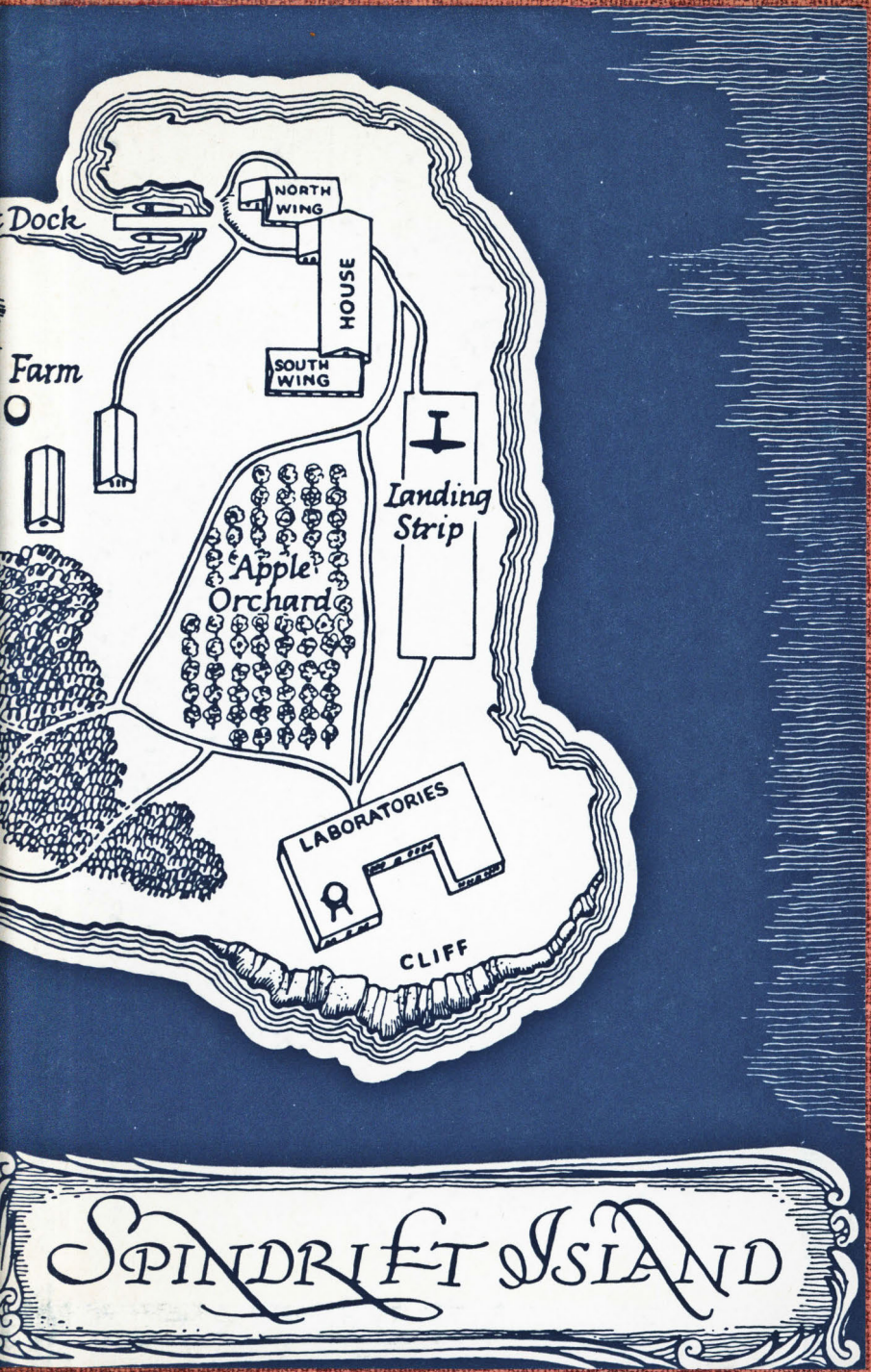
Before it left, there was time for a few words with Steve Ames.

"I'm leaving St. Thomas by air tonight for Washington," he reported. "Something new has come up and I'm needed. I may need you, too, before this case is over. The report wasn't detailed, but it carried a few implications that have me worried."

"We'll be ready if you need us," Rick assured him.

Steve's warm smile flashed. "I know," he said. "I'll see you soon."

Cultivated Land
Wooded Land
Tidal Flats
CLIFF
CLEARING
New Jersey Coast


Dock
NORTH WING
HOUSE
SOUTH WING
Farm
Landing Strip
Apple Orchard
LABORATORIES
CLIFF
SPINDRIFT ISLAND